

Nicolette

BARONESS ORCZY







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N I C O L E T T E

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By BARONESS ORCZY

NICOLETTE
CASTLES IN THE AIR
THE FIRST SIR PERCY
LEAGUE OF THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL
FLOWER O' THE LILY
THE MAN IN GREY
LORD TONY'S WIFE
LEATHERFACE
THE BRONZE EAGLE
A BRIDE OF THE PLAINS
THE LAUGHING CAVALIER
"UNTO CÆSAR"
EL DORADO
MEADOWSWEET
THE NOBLE ROGUE
THE HEART OF A WOMAN
PETTICOAT RULE

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

NICOLETTE

A TALE OF OLD PROVENCE

BY

BARONESS ORCZY

*Author of "The First Sir Percy," "Flower o'
the Lily," "Lord Tony's Wife," "The
Scarlet Pimpernel," etc.*



NEW YORK

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NICOLETTE. I

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NICOLETTE

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CHAPTER I

FADED SPLENDOUR

MIDWAY between Apt and the shores of the Durance, on the southern slope of Luberon there stands an old château. It had once been the fortified stronghold of the proud seigneurs de Ventadour, who were direct descendants of the great troubadour, and claimed kinship with the Comtes de Provence, but already in the days when Bertrand de Ventadour was a boy, it had fallen into partial decay. The battlemented towers were in ruin, the roof in many places had fallen in; only the square block, containing the old living-rooms, had been kept in a moderate state of repair. As for the rest, it was a dwelling-place for owls and rooks, the walls were pitted with crevices caused by crumbling masonry, the corbellings and battlements had long since broken away, whilst many of the windows, innocent of glass, stared,

like tear-dimmed eyes, way away down the mountain slope, past the terraced gradients of dwarf olives and carob trees, to the fertile, green valley below.

It is, in truth, fair, this land of Provence; but fair with the sad, subtle beauty of a dream—dream of splendour, of chivalry and daring deeds, of troubadours and noble ladies; fair with the romance of undying traditions, of Courts of Love and gallant minstrels, of King René and lovely Marguerite. Fair because it is sad and silent, like a gentle and beautiful mother whose children have gone out into the great world to seek fortunes in richer climes, whilst she has remained alone in the old nest, waiting with sorrow in her heart and arms ever outstretched in loving welcome in case they should return; tending and cherishing the faded splendours of yesterday; and burying with reverence and tears, one by one, the treasures that once had been her pride, but which the cruel hand of time had slowly turned to dust.

And thus it was with the once splendid domaine of the Comtes de Ventadour. The ancient family, once feudal seigneurs who owed alliance to none save to the Kings of Anjou, had long since fallen on evil days. The wild

extravagance of five generations of gallant gentlemen had hopelessly impoverished the last of their line. One acre after another of the vineyards and lemon groves of old Provence were sold in order to pay the gambling debts of M. le Comte, or to purchase a new diamond necklace for Madame, his wife. At the time of which this chronicle is a faithful record, nothing remained of the extensive family possessions, but the château perched high up on the side of the mountain and a few acres of woodland which spread in terraced gradients down as far as the valley. Oh! those woods, with their overhanging olive trees, and feathery pines, and clumps of dull-coloured carob and silvery, sweet-scented rosemary: with their serpentine paths on the edge of which buttercups and daisies and wild violets grew in such profusion in the spring, and which in the summer the wild valerian adorned with patches of purple and crimson: with their scrub and granite boulders, their mysterious by-ways, their nooks and leafy arbours, wherein it was good to hide or lie in wait for imaginary foes. Woods that were a heaven for small tripping feet, a garden of Eden for playing hide-and-seek, a land of pirates, of captive maidens and robbers, of dark chasms and crevases, and of

unequal fights between dauntless knights and fierce dragons. Woods, too, where in the autumn the leaves of the beech and chestnut turned a daffodil yellow, and those of oak and hazel-nut a vivid red, and where bunches of crimson berries fell from the mountain ash and crowds of chattering starlings came to feed on the fruit of the dwarf olive trees. Woods where tiny lizards could be found lying so still, so still as the stone of which they seemed to form a part, until you moved just a trifle nearer, and, with a delicious tremor of fear, put out your little finger, hoping yet dreading to touch the tiny, lithe body with its tip, when lo! it would dart away; out of sight even before you could call Tan-tan to come and have a look.

Tan-tan had decided that lizards were the baby children of the dragon which he had slain on the day when Nicolette was a captive maiden, tied to the big carob tree by means of her stockings securely knotted around her wee body, and that the patch of crimson hazel-bush close by was a pool of that same dragon's blood. Nicolette had spent a very uncomfortable half-hour that day, because Tan-tan took a very long time slaying that dragon, a huge tree stump, decayed and covered with fungi which were the scales upon the brute's body; he

had to slash at the dragon with his sword, and the dragon had great twisted branches upon him which were his arms and legs, and these had to be hacked off one by one. And all the while Nicolette had to weep and to pray for the success of her gallant deliverer in this unequal fight. And she got very tired and very hot, and the wind blew her brown curls all over her face, and they stuck into her mouth and her eyes and round her nose; and Tan-tan got fiercer and fiercer, and very red and very hot, until Nicolette got really sorry for the poor dragon, and wept real tears because his body and legs and arms had been a favourite resting-place of Micheline's when Micheline was too tired for play. And now the dragon had no more arms and legs, and Nicolette wept, and her loose hair stuck to her eyes, and her stockings were tied so tightly around her that they began to hurt, whilst a wasp began buzzing round her fat little bare knees.

"Courage, fair maiden!" Tan-tan exclaimed from time to time, "the hour of thy deliverance is nigh!"

But not for all the world would Nicolette have allowed Tan-tan to know that she had really been crying. And presently when the dragon was duly slain and the crimson hazel-

bush duly testified that he lay in a pool of blood, the victorious knight cut the bonds which held Nicolette to the carob tree, and lifting her in his arms, he carried her to his gallant steed, which was a young pine tree that the mistral had uprooted some few years ago, and which lay prone upon the ground—the most perfect charger any knight could possibly wish for.

What mattered after that, that old Margai was cross because Nicolette's stockings were all in holes? Tan-tan had deigned to say that Nicolette had a very good idea of play, which enigmatic utterance threw Nicolette into a veritable heaven of bliss. She did not know what it meant, but the tiny, podgy hand went seeking Tan-tan's big, hot one and nestled there like a bird in its nest, and her large liquid eyes, still wet with tears, were turned on him with the look of perfect adoration, which was wont to bring a flush of impatience into his cheek.

"Thou art stupid, Nicolette," he would say almost shamefacedly, when that look came into her eyes, and with a war-whoop, he would dart up the winding path, bounding over rocks and broken boughs like a young stag, or swarming up the mountain ash like a squirrel, shut-

ting his manly ears to the sweet, insidious call of baby lips that called pathetically to him from below:

“Tan-tan!”

Then, when outside it rained, or the mistral blew across the valley, it meant delicious wanderings through the interminable halls and corridors of the old château—more distressed maidens held in durance in castellated towers, Nicolette and Micheline held captive by cruel, unseen foes: there were walls to be scaled, prisons to be stormed, hasty flights along stone passages, discovery of fresh hiding-places, and always the same intrepid knight, energetic, hot and eager to rescue the damsels in distress.

And when the distressed damsels were really too tired to go on being rescued, there would be those long and lovely halts in the great hall where past Comtes and Comtesses de Ventadour, vicomtes and demoiselles looked down with silent scorn from out the mildewed canvases and tarnished gold frames upon the decayed splendour of their ancient home. Here, Tan-tan would for the time being renounce his rôle of chivalrous knight-errant, and would stand thoughtful and absorbed before the portraits of his dead forbears. These

pictures had a strange fascination for the boy. He never tired of gazing on them and repeating to his two devoted little listeners the tales which for the most part his grandmother had told him about these dead and gone ancestors.

There was Rambaud de Ventadour, the handsome Comte of the days of the Grand Monarque, who had hied him from his old château in Provence to the Court of Versailles, where he cut a gallant figure with the best of that brilliant crowd of courtiers, stars of greater and lesser magnitude that revolved around the dazzling central sun. There was Madame la Comtesse Beatrix, the proud beauty whom he took for wife. They were rich in those days, the seigneurs of Ventadour, and Jaume Deydier, who was Nicolette's ancestor, was nothing but a lacquey in their service; he used to take care of the old château while M. le Comte and Mme. la Comtesse went out into the gay and giddy world, to Paris, Versailles or Rambouillet.

'Twas not often the old lands of Provence saw their seigneurs in those days, not until misfortune overtook them and Geoffroy, Comte de Ventadour, Tan-tan's great-grandfather, he whose portrait hung just above the monumental hearth, returned, a somewhat sobered

man, to the home of his forbears. Here he settled down with his two sons, and here Tan-tan's father was born, and Tan-tan himself, and Micheline. But Nicolette's father, Jaume Deydier, the descendant of the lacquey, now owned all the lands that once had belonged to the Comtes de Ventadour, and he was reputed to be the richest man in Provence, but he never set foot inside the old château.

Nicolette did not really mind that her ancestor had been a lacquey. At six years of age that sort of information leaves one cold; nor did she quite know what a lacquey was, as there were none in the old homestead, over on the other side of the valley, where Margai did the scrubbing, and the washing and the baking, put Nicolette to bed, and knitted innumerable pairs of woollen stockings. But she liked to hear about her ancestor because Tan-tan liked to talk about him, and about those wonderful times when the Comtes de Ventadour had gilded coaches and rode out on gaily caparisoned horses, going hawking, or chasing, or fishing in the Durance, the while old Jaume Deydier, the lacquey, had to stay at home and clean boots.

"Whose boots, Tan-tan?" Nicolette would venture to ask, and a look of deep puzzlement.

would for a moment put to flight the laughter that dwelt in her hazel eyes.

"Thou art stupid, Nicolette," Tan-tan would reply with a shrug of his shoulders. "Those of the Comte and Comtesse de Ventadour, of course."

"All the day . . . would he clean boots?" she insisted, in her halting little lisp. Then, as Tan-tan simply vouchsafed no reply to this foolish query, she added with a sigh of mixed emotions: "They must have worn boots and boots and boots!"

After which she dismissed the subject of her ancestor from her mind because Tan-tan had gone on talking about his: about the Comte Joseph-Alexis, and the Vicomtesse Yolande, the Marquis de Croze (a collateral), and Damoysella Ysabeau d'Agoult, she who married the Comte Jeanroy de Ventadour, and was Lady-in-waiting to Mme. de Maintenon, the uncrowned Queen of France, and about a score or more of others, all great and gallant gentlemen or beautiful, proud ladies. But above all he would never weary of talking about the lovely Rixende, who was known throughout the land as the Lady of the Laurels. They also called her Riande, for short, because she was always laughing, and was so

gay, so gay, until the day when M. le Comte her husband brought her here to his old home in Provence, after which she never even smiled again. She hated the old château, and vowed that such an owl's nest gave her the megrims: in truth she was pining for the gaieties of Paris and Versailles, and even the people here, round about, marvelled why M. le Comte chose to imprison so gay a bird in this grim and lonely cage, and though he himself oft visited the Court of Versailles after that, went to Paris and to Rambouillet, he never again took his fair young wife with him, and she soon fell into melancholia and died, just like a song-bird in captivity.

Tan-tan related all this with bated breath, and his great dark eyes were fixed with a kind of awed admiration on the picture which, in truth, portrayed a woman of surpassing beauty. Her hair was of vivid gold, and nestled in ringlets all around her sweet face, her eyes were as blue as the gentian that grew on the mountain-side; they looked out of the canvas with an expression of unbounded gaiety and joy of life, whilst her lips, which were full and red, were parted in a smile.

"When I marry," Tan-tan would declare, and set his arms akimbo in an attitude of un-

swerving determination, "I shall choose a wife who will be the exact image of Rixende, she will be beautiful and merry, and she will have eyes that are as blue as the sky. Then I shall take her with me to Paris, where she will put all the ladies of the Court to the blush. But when she comes back with me to Ventadour, I shall love her so, and love her so that she will go on smiling and laughing, and never pine for the courtiers and the balls and the routs, no, not for the Emperor himself."

Nicolette, sitting on the floor, and with her podgy arms encircling her knees, gazed wide-eyed on the beautiful Rixende who was to be the very image of Tan-tan's future wife. She was not thinking about anything in particular, she just looked and looked, and wondered as one does when one is six and does not quite understand. Her great wondering eyes were just beginning to fill with tears, when a harsh voice broke in on Tan-tan's eloquence.

"A perfect programme, by my faith! Bertrand, my child, you may come and kiss my hand, and then run to your mother and tell her that I will join her at coffee this afternoon."

Bertrand did as he was commanded. The austere grandmother, tall and proud, and for-

bidding in a hooped gown, cut after the fashion of three decades ago, which she had never laid aside for the new-fangled modes of the mushroom Empire, held out her thin white hand, and the boy approached and kissed it, and she patted his cheek, and called him a true Ventadour.

"While we sit over coffee," she said, vainly trying to subdue her harsh voice to tones of gentleness, "I will tell you about your little cousin. She is called Rixende, after your beautiful ancestress, and when she grows up, she will be just as lovely as this picture. . . ."

She paused and raised a lorgnette to her eyes, gazed for a moment on the picture of the departed Riande, and then allowed her cold, wearied glance to wander round and down and about until they rested on the hunched-up little figure of Nicolette.

"What is that child doing here?" she asked, speaking to Micheline who stood by, mute and shy, as she always was when her grandmama was nigh.

It was Bertrand who replied:

"Nicolette came to ask us to go over to the mas and have coffee there," he said, hesitating, blushing, looking foolish, and avoiding Nicolette's innocent glance. "Margai has baked a

big, big brioche," Nicolette chimed in, in her piping little voice, "and churned some butter—and—and—there's cream—heaps and heaps of cream—and——"

"Go, Bertrand," the old Comtesse broke in coldly, "and you too, Micheline, to your mother. I will join you all at coffee directly."

Even Bertrand, the favourite, the *enfant gâté*, dared not disobey when grandmama spoke in that tone of voice. He said: "Yes, grandmama," quite meekly, and went out without daring to look again at Nicolette, for of a surety he knew that her eyes must be full of tears, and he himself was sorely tempted to cry, because he was so fond, so very fond of Margai's brioches, and of her yellow butter, and lovely jars of cream, whilst in mother's room there would only be black bread with the coffee. So he threw back his head and ran, just ran out of the room; and as Nicolette had an uncomfortable lump in her wee throat she did not call to Tan-tan to come back, but sat there on the floor like a little round ball, her head buried between her knees, her brown curls all tangled and tossed around her head. Micheline on the other hand made no attempt to disguise her tears. Grandmama could not very well be more contemptuous and distant

towards her than she always was, for Micheline was plain, and slightly misshapen, she limped, and her little face always looked pinched and sickly. Grandmama despised ugliness, she herself was so very tall and stately, and had been a noted beauty in the days before the Revolution. But being ugly and of no account had its advantages, because one could cry when one's heart was full and pride did not stand in the way of tears. So when grandmama presently sailed out of the hall, taking no more notice of Nicolette than if the child had been a bundle of rags, Micheline knelt down beside her little friend, and hugged and kissed her.

"Never mind about to-day, Nicolette," she said, "run back and tell Margai that we will come to-morrow. Grandmama never wants us two days running, and the brioche won't be stale."

But at six years of age, when a whole lifetime is stretched out before one, every day of waiting seems an eternity, and Nicolette cried and cried long after Micheline had gone.

But presently a slight void inside her reminded her of Margai's brioche, and of the jar of cream, and the tears dried off, of themselves; she picked herself up, and ran out of the

hall, along the familiar corridors where she had so often been a damsel in distress, and out of the postern gate. She ran down the mountain-side as fast as her short legs would carry her, down and down into the valley, then up again, bounding like a young kid, up the winding track to the old house which her much-despised ancestor had built on the slope above the Lèze when first he laid the foundations of the fortune which his descendants had consolidated after him. Up she ran, safe as a bird in its familiar haunts, up the gradients between the lines of olive trees now laden with fruit, the source of her father's wealth. For while the noble Comtes de Ventadour had wasted their patrimony in luxury and in gambling, the Deydiers, father and son, had established a trade in oil, and in orange-flower water, both of which they extracted from the trees on the very land that they had bought bit by bit from their former seigneurs; and their oil was famed throughout the country, because one of the Deydiers had invented a process whereby his oil was sweeter than any other in the whole of Provence, and was sought after far and wide, and even in distant lands. But of this Nicolette knew nothing as yet: she did not even know that she loved the grey-green olive trees,

and the terraced gradients down which she was just able to jump without tumbling, now that she was six and her legs had grown; she did not know that she loved the old house with its whitewashed walls, its sky-blue shutters, and multi-coloured tiled roof, and the crimson rose that climbed up the wall to the very window sill of her room, and the clumps of orange and lemon trees that smelt so sweet in the spring when they were laden with blossom, and the dark ficus trees, and feathery mimosa, and vine-covered arbours. She did not know that she loved them because her baby-heart had not yet begun to speak. All that she knew was that Tan-tan was beautiful, and the most wonderful boy that ever, ever was. There was nothing that Tan-tan could not do. He could jump on one leg far longer than any other boy in the country-side. He could throw the bar and the disc much farther even than Ameyric who was reckoned the finest thrower at the fêtes of Apt. He could play bows, and shoot with arrows, and to see him wrestle with some of the boys of the neighbourhood was enough to make one scream with excitement.

Nicolette also knew that Tan-tan could make her cry whenever he was cross or impatient with her, but that it was nice, oh! ever

so nice!—when he condescended to play with her, and carried her about in his arms, and when, at times, when she had been crying just in play, he comforted her with a kiss.

But that was all long, long, so very long ago. Tan-tan now was a big boy, and he never slew dragons any more; and when Nicolette through force of habit called him Tan-tan, there was always somebody to reprove her; either the old Comtesse of whom she stood in mortal awe, or Pérone who was grandmama's maid, and seemed to hold Nicolette in especial aversion, or the reverend Father Siméon-Luce who came daily from Manosque to the château in order to give lessons to Bertrand in all sorts of wonderful subjects. And so Nicolette had to say Bertrand like everybody else, only when she was quite alone with him, would she still say Tan-tan, and slide her small hand into his, and look up at him with wonder and admiration expressed in her luminous eyes. She took to coming less and less to the château; somehow she preferred to think of Tan-tan quietly, alone in her cheerful little room, from the windows of which she could see the top of the big carob tree to which he used to tie her, when she was a captive maiden and he would be slaying

dragons for her sake. Bertrand was not really Tan-tan when he was at the château, and Father Siméon-Luce or grandmama were nigh and talked of subjects which Nicolette did not understand. The happy moments were when he and Micheline would come over to the mas, and Margaï would bake a lovely brioche, and they would all sit round the polished table and drink cups of delicious coffee with whipped cream on the top, and Bertrand's eyes would glow, and he would exclaim: "Ah! it is good to be here! I wish I could stay here always." An exclamation which threw Nicolette into a veritable ecstasy of happiness, until Jaume Deydier, her father, who was usually so kind and gentle with them all, would retort in a voice that was harsh and almost cruel:

"You had better express that wish before my lady, your grandmother, my lad, and see how she will receive it."

But there were other happy moments, too. Though Bertrand no longer slew dragons, he went fishing in the Lèze on his half-holidays, and Nicolette was allowed to accompany him, and to carry his basket, or hold his rod, or pick up the fish when they wriggled and flopped about upon the stones. Micheline seldom came upon these occasions because the way was

rough, and it made her tired to walk quite so far, and at the château no one knew that Nicolette was with Bertrand when he fished. Father Siméon-Luce was away on parish work over at Manosque, and grandmama never walked where it was rough, so Bertrand would call at the mas for Nicolette, and together the two children would wander up the bank of the turbulent little mountain stream, till they came to a pool way beyond Jourdans where fish was abundant, and where a group of boulders, grass-covered and shaded by feathery pines and grim carobs, made a palace fit for a fairy-king to dwell in. Here they would pretend that they were Paul and Virginie cast out on a desert island, dependent on their own exertions for their very existence. Bertrand had to fish, else they would have nothing to eat on the morrow.

All the good things which Margai's loving hands had packed for them in the morning, were really either the result of mysterious foraging expeditions which Bertrand had undertaken at peril of his life, or of marvellous ingenuity on the part of Nicolette. Thus the luscious brioches were in reality crusts of bread which she had succeeded in baking in the sun, the milk she had really taken from a wild goat

captured and held in duress amongst the mountain fastnesses of the island, the eggs Bertrand had collected in invisible crags where sea-fowls had their nests. Oh! it was a lovely game of "Let's pretend!" which lasted until the shadows of evening crept over the crest of Luberon, and Bertrand would cast aside his rod, remembering that the hour was getting late, and grandmama would be waiting for him. Then they would return hand in hand, their shoes slung over their shoulders, their feet paddling in the cold, rippling stream. Way away to the west the setting sun would light a gorgeous fire in the sky behind Luberon, a golden fire that presently turned red, and against which the crests and crags stood out clear-cut and sharp, just as if the world ended there, and there was nothing behind the mountain-tops.

In very truth for Nicolette the world did end here; her world! the world which held the mas that was her home, and to which she would have liked to have taken Tan-tan, and never let him go again.

CHAPTER II

LE LIVRE DE RAISON

GRANDMAMA sat very stiff and erect at the head of the table; and Bertrand sat next to her with the big, metal-clasped book still open before him, and a huge key placed upon the book. Micheline was making vain endeavours to swallow her tears, and mother sat as usual in her high-backed chair, her head resting against the cushions; she looked even paler, more tired than was her wont, her eyes were more swollen and red, as if she, too, had been crying.

As Bertrand was going away on the morrow, going to St. Cyr, where he would learn to become an officer of the King, grandmama had opened the great brass-bound chest that stood in a corner of the living-room, and taken out the "Book of Reason," a book which contained the family chronicles of the de Ventadours from time immemorial, copies of their baptism and marriage certificates, their wills, and many other deeds and archives which had a bearing

upon the family history. Such a book—called "*Livre de Raison*"—exists in every ancient family of Provence; it is kept in a chest of which the head of the house has the key, and whenever occasion demands the book is taken out of its resting-place, and the eldest son reads out loud, to the assembled members of the family, extracts from it, as his father commands him to do.

Just for a time, when Bertrand's father brought a young wife home to the old château, his old mother—over-reluctantly no doubt—resigned her position as head of the house, but since his death, which occurred when Bertrand was a mere baby, and Micheline not yet born, grandmama had resumed the reins of authority which she had wielded to her own complete satisfaction ever since she had been widowed. Of a truth, her weak, backboneless daughter-in-law, with her persistent ill-health and constant repinings and tears, was not fit to conduct family affairs that were in such a hopeless tangle as those of the de Ventadours. The young Comtesse had yielded without a struggle to her mother-in-law's masterful assumption of authority; and since that hour it was grandmama who had ruled the household, superintended the education of her grandchild-

dren, regulated their future, ordered the few servants about, and kept the keys of the dower-chests. It was she also who put the traditional "Book of Reason" to what uses she thought best. Mother acquiesced in everything, never attempted to argue; it would have been useless, for grandmama would brook neither argument nor contradiction, and mother was too ill, too apathetic to attempt a conflict in which of a surety she would have been defeated.

And so when grandmama decided that as soon as Bertrand had attained his seventeenth year he should go to St. Cyr, mother had acquiesced without a murmur, even though she felt that the boy was too young, too inexperienced to be thus launched into the world where his isolated upbringing in far-off old Provence would handicap him in face of his more sophisticated companions. Only once did she suggest meekly, in her weak and tired voice, that the life at St. Cyr offered many temptations to a boy hitherto unaccustomed to freedom, and to the society of strangers.

"The cadets have so many days' leave," she said, "Bertrand will be in Paris a great deal."

"Bah!" grandmama had retorted with a shrug of her shoulders, "Sybille de Mont-Pahon is no fool, else she were not my sister.

She will look after Bertrand well enough if only for the sake of Rixende."

After which feeble effort mother said nothing more, and in her gentle, unobtrusive way set to, to get Bertrand's things in order. Of course she was bound to admit that it was a mightily good thing for the boy to go to St. Cyr, where he would receive an education suited to his rank, as well as learn those airs and graces which since the restoration of King Louis had once more become the hall-mark that proclaimed a gentleman. It would also be a mightily good thing for him to spend a year or two in the house of his great-aunt, Mme. de Mont-Pahon, a lady of immense wealth, whose niece Rixende would in truth be a suitable wife for Bertrand in the years to come. But he was still so young, so very young even for his age, and to put thoughts of a mercenary marriage, or even of a love-match into the boy's head seemed to the mother almost a sin.

But grandmama thought otherwise.

"It is never too soon," she declared, "to make a boy understand something of his future destiny, and of the responsibilities which he will have to shoulder. Sybille de Mont-Pahon desires the marriage as much as I do: she speaks

of it again in her last letter to me: Rixende's father, our younger sister's child, was one of those abominable traitors to his King who chose to lick the boots of that Corsican upstart who had dared to call himself Emperor of the French. Heaven being just, the renegade has fallen into dire penury and Sybille has cared for his daughter as if she were her own, but the stain upon her name can be wiped out only by an alliance with a family such as ours. Bertrand's path lies clear before him: win Sybille's regard and the affection of Rixende, and the Mont-Pahon millions will help to re-gild the tarnished escutcheon of the Ventadours, and drag us all out of this slough of penury and degradation in which some of our kindred have already gone under."

Thus the day drew nigh when Bertrand would have to go. Everything was ready for his departure and his box was packed, and Jasmin, the man of all work, had already taken it across to Jaume Deydier's; for at six o'clock on the morrow Deydier's barouche would be on the road down below, and it would take Bertrand as far as Pertuis, where he would pick up the diligence to Avignon and thence to Paris.

What wonder that mother wept! Bertrand had never been away from home, and Paris

was such a long, such a very long way off! Bertrand who had never slept elsewhere than in his own little bed, in the room next to Micheline's, would have to sleep in strange inns, or on the cushions of the diligence. The journey would take a week, and he would have so very little money to spend on small comforts and a good meal now and then. It was indeed awful to be so poor, that Micheline's christening cup had to be sold to provide Bertrand with pocket money on the way. Oh, pray God! pray God that the boy found favour in the eyes of his rich relative, and that Rixende should grow up to love him as he deserved to be loved!

But grandmama did not weep. She was fond of Bertrand in her way, fonder of him than she was, or had been, of any one else in the world, but in an entirely unemotional way. She was ambitious for him, chiefly because in him and through him she foresaw the re-establishment of the family fortunes.

Ever since he had come to the age of understanding, she had talked to him about his name, his family, his ancestors, the traditions and glories of the past which were recorded in the Book of Reason. And on this last afternoon which Bertrand would spend at home for many

a long year, she got the book out of the chest, and made him read extracts from it, from the story of Guilhem de Ventadour who went to the Crusades with King Louis, down to Bertrand's great-great-grandfather who was one of the pall-bearers at the funeral of the Grand-Monarque.

The reading of these extracts from the Book of Reason took on, on this occasion, the aspect of a solemn rite. Bertrand, who loved his family history, read on with enthusiasm and fervour, his eyes glowing with pride, his young voice rolling out the sentences, when the book told of some marvellous deed of valour perpetrated by one of his forbears, or of the riches and splendours which were theirs in those days, wherever they went. Nor did he tire or wish to leave off until grandmama suddenly and peremptorily bade him close the book. He had come to the page where his grandfather had taken up the family chronicles, and he had nought but tales of disappointments, of extravagance and of ever-growing poverty to record.

"There, it's getting late," grandmama said decisively, "put down the book, Bertrand, and you may lock it up in the chest, and then give me back the key."

But Bertrand lingered on, the book still open before him, the heavy key of the chest laid upon its open pages. He was so longing to read about his grandfather, and about his uncle Raymond, around whose name and personality there hung some kind of mystery. He thought that since he was going away on the morrow, the privileges of an *enfant gâté* might be accorded him to-night, and his eagerly expressed wish fulfilled. But the words had scarcely risen to his lips before grandmama said peremptorily: "Go, Bertrand, do as I tell you."

And when grandmama spoke in that tone it was useless to attempt to disobey. Swallowing his mortification, Bertrand closed the book and, without another word, he picked up the big key and took the book and locked it up in the chest that stood in the furthest corner of the room. He felt cross and disappointed, conscious of a slight put upon him as the eldest son of the house and the only male representative of the Ventadours. He was by right the head of the family, and it was not just that he should be governed by women. Ah! when he came back from St. Cyr . . . !

But here his meditations were interrupted by the sound of his name spoken by his mother.

"Bertrand ought to go," she was saying in her gentle and hesitating way, "and say good-bye to Nicolette and to Jaume Deydier and thank him for lending his barouche to-morrow."

"I do not see the necessity," grandmama replied. "He saw Deydier last Sunday, and methought he would have preferred to spend the rest of his time with his own sister."

"Micheline might go with him," mother urged, "as far as the mas. She would enjoy half an hour's play with Nicolette."

"In very truth," grandmama broke in with marked irritation, "I do not understand, my good Marcelle, how you can encourage Micheline to associate with that Deydier child. I vow her manners get worse every day, and no wonder; the brat is shockingly brought up by that old fool Margai, and Jaume Deydier himself has never been more than a peasant."

"Nicolette is only a child," mother had replied with a weary sigh, "and Micheline will have no one of her own age to speak to, when Bertrand has gone."

"As to that, my dear," grandmama retorted icily, "you have brought this early separation on yourself. Bertrand might have remained at home another couple of years, studying with

Father Siméon-Luce, but frankly this intimacy with the Deydiers frightened me, and hastened my decision to send him to St. Cyr."

"It was a cruel decision, madame," the Comtesse Marcelle rejoined with unwonted energy, "Bertrand is young and——"

"He is seventeen," the old Comtesse interposed in her hard, trenchant voice, "an impressionable age. And we do not want a repetition of the adventure which sent Raymond de Ventadour——"

"Hush, madame, in Heaven's name!" her daughter-in-law broke in hastily, and glanced with quick apprehension in the direction where Bertrand stood gazing with the eager curiosity of his age, wide-eyed and excited, upon the old Comtesse, scenting a mystery of life and adventure which was being withheld from him.

Grandmama beckoned to him, and made him kneel on the little cushion at her feet. He had grown into a tall and handsome lad of late, with the graceful, slim stature of his race, and that wistful expression in the eyes which is noticeable in most of the portraits of the de Ventadours, and which gave to his young face an almost tragic look.

Grandmama with delicate, masterful hand, pushed back the fair unruly hair from the lad's

forehead and gazed searchingly into his face. He returned her glance fearlessly, even lovingly, for he was fond, in a cool kind of way, of his stately grandmother, who was so austere and so stern to everybody and unbent only for him.

"I wonder," she said, and her eyes, which time had not yet dimmed, appeared to search the boy's very soul.

"What at, grandmama?" he asked.

"If I can trust you, Bertrand."

"Trust me?" the boy exclaimed, indignant at the doubt. "I am Comte de Ventadour," he went on proudly. "I would sooner die than commit a dishonourable action. . . ."

Whereat grandmama laughed;—an unpleasant, grating laugh it was, which acted like an icy douche upon the boy's enthusiasm. She turned her gaze on her daughter-in-law, whose pale face took on a curious ashen hue, whilst her trembling lips murmured half incoherently:

"Madame—for pity's sake——"

"Ah bah!" the old lady rejoined, with a shrug of the shoulders, "the boy will have to know sooner or later that his father——"

"Madame——!" the younger woman pleaded once more, but this time there was just

a thought of menace, and less of humility in her tone.

"There, there!" grandmama rejoined dryly, "calm your fears, my good Marcelle, I won't say anything to-day. Bertrand goes to-morrow. We shall not see him for two years: let him by all means go under the belief that no de Ventadour has ever committed a dishonourable action."

Throughout this short passage of arms between his mother and grandmother, Bertrand had remained on his knees, his great dark eyes, with that wistful look of impending tragedy in them, wandering excitedly from one familiar face to the other. This was not the first time that his keen ears had caught a hint of some dark mystery that clung around the memory of the father whom he had never known. Like most children, however, he would sooner have died than ask a direct question, but this he knew, that whenever his father's name was mentioned, his mother wept, and grandmama's glance became more stern, more forbidding than its wont. And, now on the eve of his departure for St. Cyr, he felt that mystery encompass him, poisoning the joy he had in going away from the gloomy old château, from old women and girls and senile servitors, out into

the great gay world of Paris, where the romance and adventures of which he had dreamt ever since he could remember anything, would at last fall to his lot, with all the good things of this life. He felt that he was old enough now to know what it was that made his mother so perpetually sad, that she had become old before her time, sick and weary, an absolute non-entity in family affairs over which grandmama ruled with a masterful hand. But now he was too proud to ask. They treated him as a child—very well! he was going away, and when he returned he would show them who would henceforth be the master of his family's destiny. But for the moment all that he ventured on was a renewed protest:

"You can trust me in everything, grandmama," he said. "I am not a child."

Grandmama was still gazing into his face, gazing as if she would read all the secrets of his young unsophisticated soul: he returned her gaze with a glance as searching as her own. For a moment they were in perfect communion these two, the old woman with one foot in the grave, and the boy on the threshold of life. They understood one another, and each read in the other's face, the same pride, the same ambition, and the same challenge to an adverse

fate. For a moment, too, it seemed as if the grandmother would speak, tell the boy something at least of the tragedies which had darkened the last few pages of the family chronicles; and Bertrand, quite unconsciously, put so much compelling force into his gaze that the old woman was on the point of yielding. But once more the mother's piteous voice pleaded for silence:

“Madame!” she exclaimed.

Her voice broke the spell; grandmama rose abruptly to her feet, which caused Bertrand to tumble backwards off the cushion. By the time he had picked himself up again, grandmama had gone.

Bertrand felt low and dispirited, above all cross with his mother for interfering. He went out of the room without kissing her. At first he thought of following grandmama into her room and forcing her to tell him all that he wanted to know, but pride held him back. He would not be a suppliant: he would not beg, there where in a very short time he would command. There could be nothing dishonourable in the history of the de Ventadours. They were too proud, too noble, for dishonour even to touch their name. Instinctively Bertrand

had wandered down to the great hall where hung the portraits of those Ventadours who had been so rich and so great in the past. Bertrand was now going out into the world in order to rebuild those fortunes which an unjust fate had wrested from him. He gazed on the portrait of lovely Rixende. She, too, had been rich and brought a splendid dowry to her lord when she married him. He had proved ungrateful and she had died of sorrow. Bertrand marvelled if in truth his cousin Rixende was like her namesake. Anyway she was rich, and he would love her to his dying day if she consented to be his wife.

Already he loved her because he had been told that she had hair glossy and golden like the Rixende of the picture, and great mysterious eyes as blue as the gentian; and that her lips smiled like those of Rixende had done, whereupon he marvelled if they would be good to kiss. After which, by an unexplainable train of thought, he fell to thinking of Nicolette. She had sent him a message by Micheline yesterday that she would wait for him all the afternoon, on their island beside the pool. It was now past four o'clock. The shades of evening were fast gathering in, in the valley below, and even up here on the heights the

ciliated shadows of carob and olive were beginning to lengthen. It would take an hour to run as far as the pool; and then it would be almost time to come home again, for of late Jaume Deydier had insisted that Nicolette must be home before dark. It was foolish of Nicolette to be waiting for him so far away. Why could she not be sensible and come across to the château to say good-bye? The boy was fighting within himself, fighting a battle wherein tenderness and vanity were on the one side, and a false sense of pride and manliness on the other. In the end it was perhaps vanity that won the fight. All day he had been treated as a child that was being packed up and sent to school: all day he had been talked to, and admonished, and preached at, first by grand-mama, and then by Father Siméon-Luce; he had been wept over by mother and by Micheline: now Nicolette neither admonished nor wept. He would not allow her to do the former and she was too sensible to attempt the latter. She would probably stand quite still and listen while he told her of his plans for the future, and all the fine things he would do when he was of age, and rich, and had married his cousin Rixende.

Nicolette was sensible, she would soothe his

ruffled self-esteem and restore to him some of that confidence in himself of which he would stand in sore need during the long and lonely voyage that lay before him.

Hardly conscious of his own purpose, Bertrand sauntered down the mountain-side. It was still hot on this late September afternoon, and the boy instinctively sought, as he descended, the cool shadows that lay across the terraced gradients. A pungent scent of rosemary and eucalyptus was in the air, and from the undergrowth around came the muffled sound of mysterious, little pattering feet, or call of tiny beasts to their mates. Bertrand's head ached, and his hands felt as if they were on fire. A curious restlessness and dissatisfaction made him feel out of tune with these woods which he loved more than he knew, with the blood-red berries of the mountain ash that littered the ground, and the low bushes of hazelnut which autumn had painted a vivid crimson. Now he was down in the valley and up again on the spur behind which tossed and twirled the clear mountain stream.

The rough walk was doing him good: his body felt hot but his hands were cooler and his temples ceased to throb. When he reached the water's edge, he sat down on a boulder and

took off his boots and his stockings and slung them over his shoulder, and walked up the bed of the stream until the waters widened into that broad, silent pool which washed the shores of his fairy island. Already from afar he had spied Nicolette; she was watching for him on the grassy slope, clinging with one hand to the big carob that overhung the pool. She had on a short kirtle of faded blue linen, and a white apron and shift, the things she always wore when she was Virginie and he was Paul on their fairy island. She had obviously been paddling, for she had taken off her shoes and stockings, and her feet and legs shone like rose-tinted metal in the cool shade of the trees. Her head was bare and a soft breeze stirred the loose brown curls about her head, but Bertrand could not see her face, for her head was bent as if she were gazing intently into the pool. Way up beyond the valley, the sinking sun had tinged the mountain peaks with gold, and had already lit the big, big fire in the sky behind Luberon, but here on the island everything was cool and grey and peaceful, with only the murmur of the stream over the pebbles to break the great solemn silence of the woods.

When Bertrand jumped upon the big boul-

der, the one from which he was always wont to fish, Nicolette looked up and smiled. But she did not say anything, not at first, and Bertrand stood by a little shamefaced and quite unaccountably bashful.

"The fish have been shy all the afternoon," were the first words that Nicolette said.

"Did you try and fish?" Bertrand asked.

Nicolette pointed to a rod and empty basket which lay on the grass close by.

"I borrowed those from Ameyric over at La Bastide," she said. "I wanted to try my hand at it." She paused. Then she swallowed; swallowed hard and resolutely as if there had been a very big lump in her throat. Then she said quite simply:

"I shall have to do something on long afternoons when I come here——"

"But you are going away too," the boy rejoined, quite angry with himself because his voice was husky.

"Not till after the New Year. Then I am going to Avignon."

"Avignon?"

"To school at the Ladies of the Visitation," she explained, and added quaintly: "I am very ignorant, you know, Tan-tan."

He frowned and she thought that he was cross because she had called him Tan-tan.

"By the time you come back," she said meekly, "I shall be quite used to calling you M. le Comte."

"Don't be stupid, Nicolette," was all that Bertrand could think of saying.

They were both silent after that, and as Nicolette turned to climb up the gradient, Bertrand followed her, half reluctantly. He knew she was going to the hut of Paul et Virginie: the place they were wont to call their island home. It was just an old, a very old olive tree, with a huge, hollow trunk, in which they, as children, could easily find shelter, and in the spring the ground around it was gay with buttercups and daisies; and bunches of vivid blue gentian and lavender and broom nestled against the great grey boulders. Here Bertrand and Nicolette had been in the habit of sitting when they pretended to be Paul et Virginie cast off on a desert island, and here they would eat the food which "Paul" had found at peril of his life, and which "Virginie" had cooked with such marvellous ingenuity. They had been so happy there, so often. The wood-pigeons would come and pick up the crumbs after they had finished eating, and now and

then, when they sat very, very still, a hare would dart out from behind a great big boulder, and peep out at them with large frightened eyes, his long ears sharply silhouetted against the sun-kissed earth, and at the slightest motion from them, or wilful clapping of their hands, it would dart away again, leaving Bertrand morose and fretful because, though he was a big man, he was not yet allowed to have a gun.

"When I am a man," was the burden of his sighing, and Nicolette would have much ado to bring the smile back into his eyes.

They had been so happy—so often. The flowers were their friends, the wild pansy with its quizzical wee face, the daisy with the secrets, which its petals plucked off one by one, revealed, the lavender which had to be carried home in huge bunches for Margai to put in muslin bags. All but the gentian. Nicolette never liked the gentian, though its petals were of such a lovely, heavenly blue. But whenever Bertrand spied one he would pluck it, and stick it into his buttonhole: "The eyes of my Rixende," he would say, "will be bluer than this." Fortunately there was not much gentian growing on the island of Paul et Virginie.

They had been so happy here—so often,

away from grandmama's stern gaze and Father Siméon-Luce's admonitions, when they had just pretended and pretended: pretended that the Lèze was the great open sea, on which never a ship came in sight to take them away from their beloved island, out into the great world which they had never known.

But to-day to Bertrand, who was going away on the morrow into that same great and unknown world, the game of pretence appeared futile and childish. He was a man now, and could no longer play. Somehow he felt cross with Nicolette for having put on her "Virginie" dress, and he pretended that his feet were cold, and proceeded to put on his stockings and his boots.

"The big ship has come in sight, Bertrand," the girl said. "We will never see our island again."

"That is nonsense, Nicolette," Bertrand rejoined, seemingly deeply occupied in the putting on of his boots. "We will often come here, very often, when the trout are plentiful and I am home for the holidays."

She shook her head.

"Margai," she said, "overheard Pérone talking to Jasmin the other day, and Pérone said

that Mme. la Comtesse did not wish you to come home for at least two years."

"Well! in two years' time . . ." he argued, with a shrug of his shoulders.

She offered him some lovely buttered brioche, and said it was fish she had dried by a new process on slabs of heated stone, and she also had some milk, which she said she had found inside a coconut.

"The coconut trees are plentiful on the island," she said, "and the milk from the nuts is as sweet as if it were sugared." But Bertrand would not eat, he said he had already had coffee and cakes in grandmama's room, and Nicolette abstractedly started crumbling up the brioche, hoping that the wood-pigeons would soon come for their meal. She was trying to recapture the spirit of a past that was no more: the elusive spirit of that happy world in which she had dwelt alone with Tan-tan. But strive how she might, she felt that the outer gates of that world were being closed against her for ever. Suddenly she realised that it was getting dark, and that she felt a little cold. She squatted on the ground and put on her shoes and stockings.

"We shall have to hurry," she said, "father does not like me to be out long after dark."

Then she jumped to her feet and started climbing quickly up the stone-built terraces, darting at break-neck speed round and about the olive trees, and deliberately turning her back on the pool, and the fairy island which she knew now that she would never, never see again. Bertrand had some difficulty in following her. Though he felt rather cross, he also felt vaguely remorseful. Somehow he wished now that he had not come at all.

"Nicolette," he called, "why, you have not said good-bye!"

And this he said because Nicolette had in truth scurried just like a young hare, way off to the right, and was now running and leaping down the gradients till she reached the fence of the mas which was her home. Here she leaned against the gate. Bertrand, running after her as fast as he could, could scarce distinguish her in the fast gathering gloom. He could only vaguely see the gleam of her white shift and apron. She was leaning against the gate, and a pale gleam of twilight outlined her arm and hand and the silhouette of her curly head.

"Nicolette," he called again, "don't go in, I must kiss you good-bye."

As usual she was obedient to his command,

and waited, panting a little after this madcap run through the woods, till he was near her.

He took her hand and kissed her on the temple.

“Good-bye, Nicolette,” he said cheerily, “don’t forget me.”

“Good-bye, Bertrand,” she murmured under her breath.

Then she turned quickly: and was through the gate and out of sight before he could say another word. Ah well! girls were strange beings. So unreliable. A man never knew, when she smiled, if she was going to frown the very next minute.

As to that, Bertrand was glad that Nicolette had not cried, or made a scene. He was a man now, and really hated the sentimental episodes to which his dear mother and even Micheline indulged in so generously. Poor little Nicolette, no doubt her life would be rather dull after this, as Micheline was not really strong enough for the violent exercise in which Nicolette revelled with all the ardour of her warm blood and healthy young body. But no doubt she would like the convent at Avignon, and the society of rich, elegant girls, for of a truth, as grandmama always said, her manners had of late become rather rough,

under the tutelage of old Margäi—a mere servant—and of her father, who was no more than a peasant. The way she ran away from him, Bertrand, just now, without saying a proper “good-bye,” argued a great want of knowledge on her part of the amenities of social life. And when he said to her: “Good-bye, Nicolette, do not forget me!” she should have answered . . .

Ah, bah! What mattered? It was all over now, thank the Lord, the good-byes and the weepings and the admonitions. The book of life lay open at last before him. To-morrow he would shake the dust of old Provence from his feet. To-morrow he would begin to read. Paris! Rixende! Wealth! The great big world. Oh, God! how weary he was of penury and of restraint!

CHAPTER III

THE HONOUR OF THE NAME

BERTRAND came home for his Easter holidays after he had passed out of St. Cyr and received his commission in the King's bodyguard: an honour which he owed as much to his name as to Madame de Mont-Pahon's wealth and influence. He was only granted two weeks' vacation because political conditions in Paris were in a greatly disturbed state just then, owing to the King's arbitrary and reactionary policy, which caused almost as much seething discontent as that which precipitated the Revolution nigh on forty years ago. Louis XVIII in very truth was so unpopular at this time, and the assassination of his nephew, the Duc de Berry, two years previously, had so preyed upon his mind that he never stirred out of his château de Versailles save under a powerful escort of his trusted bodyguard.

It was therefore a matter of great importance for Bertrand's future career that he

should not be too long absent from duty, which at any moment might put him in the way of earning distinction for himself, and the personal attention of the King.

As it happened, when he did come home during the spring of that year 1822, Nicolette was detained in the convent school at Avignon because she had measles. A very prosy affair, which caused poor little Micheline many a tear.

She had been so anxious that her dear little friend should see how handsome Bertrand had grown, and how splendid he looked in his beautiful blue uniform all lavishly trimmed with gold lace, and the képi with the tuft of white feathers in front, which gave him such a martial appearance.

In truth, Micheline was so proud of her brother that she would have liked to take him round the whole neighbourhood and show him to all those who had known him as a reserved and rather puny lad. She would above all things have loved to take him across to the mas and let Jaume Deydier and Margai see him, for then surely they would write and tell Nicolette about him. Bertrand acquiesced quite humouredly in the idea that she should thus take him on a grand tour to be inspected, and

plans were formed to go over to Apt, and see M. le Curé there, and Gastinel Barnadou, the mayor of the commune, who lived at La Bastide, and whose son Ameyric was considered the handsomest lad of the country-side, and the bravest and most skilful too. All the girls were in love with him because he could run faster, jump higher, and throw the bar and the disc farther than any man between the Caulon and the Durance, but Micheline knew that as soon as Huguette or Madeleine or Rigaude set eyes on her Bertrand they would never look on any other man again. And Bertrand smiled and listened to Micheline's plans, and promised that he would go with her to Jaume Deydier's or to Apt, or whithersoever she chose to take him. But the Easter holidays came and went: Father Siméon-Luce came over from Manosque to celebrate Mass in the chapel of the château, then he went away again. And after Easter the weather turned cold and wet. It was raining nearly every day, and for one reason or another it was difficult to go over to the mas, and the expedition to Apt was an impossibility because there was no suitable vehicle in the coach-house of the château, and it was impos-

sible to borrow Jaume Deydier's barouche until one had paid him a formal visit.

And so the time went by and the day was at hand when Bertrand had to return to Versailles. Instead of going in comfort in Deydier's barouche as far as Pertuis, he went with Jasmin in the cart, behind the old horse that had done work in and about the château for more years than Bertrand could remember. The smart officer of the King's bodyguard sat beside the old man-of-all-work, on a wooden plank, with his feet planted on the box that contained his gorgeous uniforms, and his one thought while the old horse trotted leisurely along the rough mountain roads, was how good it would be to be back at Versailles. Visions of the brilliantly lighted salons floated tantalisingly before his gaze, of the King and the Queen, and M. le Comte d'Artois, and all the beautiful ladies of the Court, the supper and card parties, the Opera and the rides in the Bois. And amidst all these visions there was one more tantalising, more alluring than the rest: the vision of his still unknown cousin Rixende. She was coming from the fashionable convent in Paris, where she had been finishing her education, in order to spend the next summer holidays with her great-aunt, Mme. de

Mont-Pahon. In his mind he could see her as the real counterpart of the picture which he had loved ever since he was a boy. Rixende of the gentian-blue eyes and fair curly locks! His Lady of the Laurels. Rixende—the heir-ess to the Mont-Pahons' millions—who, with her wealth, her influence and her beauty, would help to restore the glories of the family of Ventadour, which to his mind was still the finest family in France. With her money he would restore the old feudal château in Provence, of which, despite its loneliness and dilapidated appearance, he was still inordinately proud.

Once more the halls and corridors would resound with laughter and merry-making, once more would gallant courtiers whisper words of love in fair ladies' ears! He and lovely Rixende would restore the Courts of Love that had been the glory of old Provence in mediæval days; they would be patrons of the Arts, and attract to this fair corner of France all that was greatest among the wits, sweetest among musicians, most famous in the world of letters. Ah! they were lovely visions that accompanied Bertrand on his lonely drive through the mountain passes of his boyhood's home. For as long as he could, he gazed be-

hind him on the ruined towers of the old château, grimly silhouetted against the afternoon sky. Then, when a sharp turn of the road hid the old owl's nest from view, he looked before him, where life beckoned to him full of promises and of coming joys, and where through a haze of fluffy, cream-coloured clouds, he seemed to see blue-eyed Rixende holding out to him a golden cornucopia from which fell a constant stream of roses, each holding a bag full of gold concealed in its breast.

It was owing to the war with Spain, and the many conspiracies of the Carbonari that Bertrand was unable for the next three years to obtain a sufficient extension of leave to visit his old home. He was now a full lieutenant in the King's bodyguard, and Mme. de Mont-Pahon wrote with keen enthusiasm about his appearance and his character, both of which had earned her appreciation.

"It is the dream of my declining days," she wrote to her sister, the old Comtesse de Ventadour, *"that Bertrand and Rixende should be united. Both these children are very dear to me: kinship and affection binds me equally to both. I am old now, and sick, but my most*

earnest prayer to God is to see them happy ere I close my eyes in their last long sleep."

In another letter she wrote:

"Bertrand has won my regard as well as my affection. In this last affair at Belfort, whither the King's bodyguard was sent to quell the conspiracy of those abominable Carbonari, his bravery as well as his shrewdness were liberally commented on. I only wish he would make more headway in his courtship of Rixende. Of course the child is young, and does not understand how serious a thing life is: but Bertrand also is too serious at times, at others he seems to reserve his enthusiasm for the card-table or the pleasure of the chase. For his sake, as well as for that of Rixende, I would not like this marriage, on which I have set my heart, to be delayed too long."

Later on she became even more urgent:

"The doctors tell me I have not long to live. Ah, well! my dear, I have had my time, let the two children whom I love have theirs. My fortune will suffice for a brilliant life for them, I make no doubt: but it must remain in its entirety. I will not have Bertrand squander

it at cards or in pearl-necklaces for the ladies of the Opera. Therefore hurry on the marriage on your side, my good Margarita, and I will do my best on mine."

The old Comtesse, with her sister's last letter in her hand, hurried to her daughter-in-law's room.

"You see, Marcelle," she said resolutely, after a hurried and unsympathetic inquiry as to the younger woman's health: "You see how it is. Everything depends on Bertrand. Sybille de Mont-Pahon means to divide her wealth between him and Rixende, but he will lose all if he does not exert himself. Oh! if I had been a man!" she exclaimed, and looked down with an obvious glance of contempt on the two invalids, mother and daughter, the two puny props of the tottering house of Ventadour.

"Bertrand can but lead an honourable life," the mother argued wearily. "He is an honourable man, but you could not expect him at his age to toady to an old woman for the mere sake of her wealth."

"Who talks of toadying?" the old woman exclaimed, with an irritable note in her harsh voice. "You are really stupid, Marcelle."

Over five years had gone by since first Bertrand went away from the old home in Provence, driven as far as Pertuis in Deydier's barouche, his pockets empty, and his heart full of longing for that great world into which he was just entering. Five years and more, and now he was more than a man; he was the head of the house of Ventadour, one of the most renowned families in France, who had helped to make history, and whose lineage could be traced back to the days of Charlemagne, even though, now—in the nineteenth century—they owned but a few mètres of barren land around an ancient and dilapidated château.

Not even grandmama disputed Bertrand's right at this hour to make use of the Book of Reason as he thought best, and she had promised him over and over again of late, by written word, that when next he came to Ventadour, she would give him the key of the chest that contained the family archives. To a Provençal, the key to the Book of Reason is a symbol of his own status as head of the house, and to Bertrand it meant all that and more, because his pride in his family and lineage, and even in the old barrack which he called home was the dominating factor in all his actions, and because he felt that there could be nothing

in his family history that was not worthy and honourable. There had been secrets kept from him while he was a child, secrets in connection with his father, and with his great-uncle, Raymond de Ventadour, but Bertrand was willing to admit that there might have been a reason for this, one that was good enough to determine the actions of grandmama, who was usually to be trusted in all affairs that concerned the honour of the family.

But somehow things did not occur just as Bertrand had expected. His arrival at the château was a great event, of course, and from the first he felt that he was no longer being treated as a boy, and that even his grandmother spoke to him of family affairs in tones of loving submission which went straight to his heart, and gave him that consciousness of importance for which he had been longing ever since he had left childhood's days behind him. But close on a fortnight went by before at last, in deference to his urgent demand, she gave him the key of the chest that contained the family archives. It was a great moment for Bertrand. He would not touch the chest while anyone was in the room; his first delving into those priceless treasures should have no witness save the unseen spirit that animated him. With an in-

dulgent shrug of her aristocratic shoulders, grandmama left him to himself, and Bertrand spent a delicious five minutes, first in turning the key in the old-fashioned lock of the chest, then lifting out the book, and turning over its time-stained pages.

He was on the lookout for records that would throw some light upon the life and adventures of his uncle Raymond de Ventadour, whose name was never mentioned by grandmama, save with a sneer. Bertrand was quite sure that if the Book of Reason had been kept as it should, he would learn something that would clear up the mystery that hung over that name. He was above all anxious to find out something definite about his own father's death, without having recourse to the cruel task of interrogating his mother.

But though the chest contained a number of births, baptismal, marriage and death certificates, and the book a few records of the political events of the past fifty years, there was nothing there that would throw any light upon the secrets that Bertrand long to fathom. Nothing about Raymond de Ventadour, save his baptismal certificate and a brief record that he fought under General Moreau in Germany, and subsequently in Egypt. What happened

to him after that, where he went, when he came back—if he came back at all—and when he died, was not chronicled in this book wherein every passing event, however futile, if it was in any way connected with the Ventadours, had been recorded for the past five hundred years. In the same way there was but little said about Bertrand's father, there was his marriage certificate to Marcelle de Cercomans, and that of his death the year of Micheline's birth. But that was all. A few trinkets lay at the bottom of the chest, among these a seal-ring with the arms of the Ventadours engraved thereon, and their quaint device, "*moun amour e moun noum.*"

Bertrand loved the device; for his love and for his name, he would in very truth have sacrificed life itself. He took up the ring and slipped it on his finger; then he continued to turn over the pages of the old book, still hoping to extract from it that knowledge he so longed to possess.

Half an hour later a soft foot-tread behind him roused him from his meditations, and two loving arms were creeping round his neck:

"Are you ready, Bertrand?" Micheline asked.

"Ready for what?" he retorted.

"You said you would come over to the mas with me this afternoon."

Bertrand frowned, and then with obvious moodiness, he picked up the family chronicle, and went to lock it up in the big dower-chest.

"You are coming, Bertrand, are you not?" Micheline insisted with a little catch in her throat.

"Not to-day, Micheline," he replied after awhile.

"Bertrand!"

The cry came with such a note of reproach that the frown deepened on his forehead.

"Grandmama has such a violent objection to my going," he said, somewhat shamefacedly.

"And you—at your age——" Micheline broke in more bitterly than she had ever spoken to her brother in her life; "you are going to allow, grandmama, an old woman, to dictate to you as to where you should go, and where not?"

Bertrand at this taunt aimed at his dignity had blushed to the roots of his hair, and a look of obstinacy suddenly hardened his face, making it seem quite set and old.

"There is no question," he said coldly, "of anybody dictating to me: it is a question of

etiquette and of usage. It was Jaume Deydier's duty in the first instance to pay his respects to me."

"It is not a question of etiquette or of usage, Bertrand," the girl retorted hotly, "but of Nicolette our friend and playmate. I do not know what keeps Jaume Deydier from setting foot inside the château, but God knows that he owes us nothing, so why should he come? We on the other hand owe him countless kindnesses and boundless generosity, which we can never repay save by kindness and courtesy. Why! when you were first at St. Cyr——"

"Micheline!"

The word rang out hard and trenchant, as the old Comtesse sailed into the room. Micheline at once held her tongue, cowed as she always was in the presence of her autocratic grandmother.

"What is the discussion about?" grandmama asked coldly.

"My going to the mas," Bertrand replied.

"To pay your respects to Jaume Deydier?" she asked, with a sneer.

"To see Nicolette," Micheline broke in boldly. "Bertrand's oldest friend."

"Quite a nice child," the old Comtesse owned

with ironical graciousness. "She is at liberty to come and see Bertrand when she likes."

"She is too proud——" Micheline hazarded, then broke down suddenly in her speech, because grandmama had raised her lorgnette, and was staring at her so disconcertingly that Micheline felt tears of mortification rising to her eyes.

"So," grandmama said with that biting sarcasm which hurt so terribly, and which she knew so well how to throw into her voice. "So Mademoiselle Deydier is proud, is she? Too proud to pay her respects to the Comtesse de Ventadour. Ah, well! let her stay at home then. It is not for a Ventadour to hold out a hand of reconciliation to one of the Deydiers."

"Reconciliation, grandmama?" Bertrand broke in quickly. "Has there been a quarrel then?"

For a moment it seemed to Bertrand's keenly searching eyes as if the old Comtesse's usually magnificent composure was slightly ruffled. Certain it is that a delicate flush rose to her withered cheeks, and her retort did not come with that trenchant rapidity to which she had accustomed her family and her household. However, the hesitation—if hesitation

there was—was only momentary: an instant later she had shrugged her shoulders, elevated her eyebrows with her own inimitably grandiose air, and riposted coolly:

“Quarrel? My dear Bertrand? Surely you are joking. How could there be a quarrel between us and the—er—Deydiers? The old man chooses to hold himself aloof from the château: but that is right and proper, and no doubt he knows his place. We cannot have those sort of people frequenting our house in terms of friendship—especially if your cousin Rixende should pay us a visit one of these days. Once an intimacy is set up, it is very difficult to break off again—and surely you would not wish that oil-dealer’s child to meet your future wife on terms of equality?”

“Rixende is not that yet,” Bertrand rejoined almost involuntarily, “and if she comes here——”

“She will have to come here,” grandmama said in her most decided tone. “Sybille de Mont-Pahon wishes it, and it is right and proper that Rixende should be brought here to pay her respects to me—and to your mother,” she added as with an after-thought.

“But——”

"But what," she asked, for he seemed to hesitate.

"Rixende is so fastidious," Bertrand said moodily. "She has been brought up in the greatest possible luxury. This old house with its faded furniture——"

"This old house with its faded furniture," grandmama broke in icily, "has for centuries been the home of the Comtes de Ventadour, a family whose ancestors claimed kinship with kings. Surely it is good enough to shelter the daughter of a—of a—what is their name?—a Peyron-Bompar! My good Bertrand, your objections are both futile and humiliating to us all. Thank God! we have not sunk so low, that we cannot entertain a Mademoiselle—er—Peyron-Bompar and her renegade father in a manner befitting our rank."

Grandmama had put on her grandest manner, and further argument was, of course, useless. Bertrand said nothing more, only stood by, frowning moodily. Micheline had succeeded in reaching the shelter of the window recess. From here she could still see Bertrand, could watch every play of emotion on his tell-tale face. She felt intensely sorry for him, and ashamed for him as well as for herself. But above all for him. He was a man, he

should act as a man; whilst she was only a weak, misshapen, ugly creature with a boundless capacity for suffering, and no more courage than a cat. Even now she was conscious right through her pity for Bertrand which dominated every other feeling—of an intense sense of relief that the tattered curtain hung between her and grandmama, and concealed her from the irascible old lady's view.

She tried to meet Bertrand's eyes: but he purposely evaded hers. As for him, he felt vaguely ashamed he knew not exactly of what. He dared not look at Micheline, fearing to read either reproach or pity in her gaze; either of which would have galled him. For the first time, too, in his life, he felt out of tune with the ideals of the old Comtesse, whom he revered as the embodiment of all the splendours of the Ventadours. Now his pride was up in arms against her for her assumption of control. Where was his vaunted manhood? Was he—the head of the house—to be dictated to by women? Already he was lashing himself up into a state of rebellion and of fury. Planning a sudden assertion of his own authority, when his grandmother's voice, hard and trenchant, acted like a cold douche upon his heated temper, and sobered him instantly.

"To revert to the subject of those Deydiers," she said coldly, "my sister Mme. de Mont-Pahon has made it a point that all intimacy shall cease between you and them, before she would allow of Rixende's engagement to you."

"But why?" Bertrand exclaimed almost involuntarily. "In Heaven's name, why?"

"You could ask her," grandmama retorted quietly.

"Mme de Mont-Pahon must understand that I seek my own friends, how and where I choose——"

"Your great-aunt would probably retort that she will then seek her heir also where and how she chooses—as well as Rixende's future husband——"

Then as Bertrand in the excess of his shame and mortification buried his head in his hands, she went up to him, and placed her wrinkled aristocratic hand upon his shoulder.

"There, there," she said almost gently, "don't be childish, my dear Bertrand. Alas! when one is poor, one is always kissing the rod. All you want now is patience. Once Rixende is your wife, and my obstinate sister has left her millions to you both, and she and I have gone to join the great majority, you can please yourself in the matter of your friends."

"It is so shameful to be poor," Bertrand murmured bitterly.

"Yes, it is," the old woman assented dryly. "That is the reason why I wish to drag you out of all this poverty and humiliation. But do not make the task too hard for me, Bertrand. I am old, and your mother is feeble. If I were to go you would soon drift down the road of destiny in the footsteps of your father."

"My father?"

"Your father like you was weak and vacillating. Sunk in the slough of debt, enmeshed in a network of obligations which he had not the moral strength to meet, he blew out his brains, when broke the dawn of the inevitable day of reckoning."

"It is false!" Bertrand cried impulsively.

He had jumped to his feet.

Clinging with one hand to the edge of the table, he faced the old Comtesse, his eyes gazing horror-struck upon that stern impassive face, on which scarce a tremor had passed while she delivered this merciless judgment on her own son.

"It is false!" the young man reiterated.

"It is true, Bertrand," the old woman rejoined quietly. "The ring which you now

wear, I myself took off his finger, after the pistol dropped from his lifeless hand."

She was on the point of saying something more, when a long-drawn sigh, a moan, and an ominous thud, stayed the words upon her lips. Bertrand looked up at once, and the next moment darted across the room. There lay his mother, half crouching against the door frame to which she had clung when she felt herself swooning. Bertrand was down on his knees in an instant, and Micheline came as fast as she could to his side.

"Quick, Micheline, help me!" Bertrand whispered hurriedly. "She is as light as a feather. I'll carry her to her room."

The only one who had remained quite unmoved was the old Comtesse. When she heard the moan, and then the thud, she glanced coolly over her shoulder, and seeing her daughter-in-law, crouching helpless in the doorway, she only said dryly:

"My good Marcelle, why make a fuss? The boy was bound to know——"

But already Bertrand had lifted the poor feeble body in his arms, and was carrying his mother along the corridor to her own room. Here he deposited her on the sofa, on which in truth she spent most of her days, and here

she lay now with her head against the pillows, her face so pale and drawn that Bertrand felt a great wave of love and sympathy for her surging in his heart.

"Poor little mother," he said tenderly, and knelt by her side, chafing her cold hands, and gazing anxiously into her face. She opened her eyes, and looked at him. She seemed not to know at first what had happened.

"Bertrand!" she murmured, as if astonished to see him there.

Her astonishment in itself was an involuntary reproach, so very little of his time did Bertrand spend with his sad-eyed, ailing mother. A sharp pang of remorse went right through him as he noted, for the first time, how very aged and worn she had become since last he had been at home. Tears now were pouring down her cheeks, and he put out his arms, with a vague longing to draw her aching head to his breast, and let her rest there, while he would comfort her. She saw the gesture, and the ghost of a smile lit up her pale, wan face, and in her eyes there came a pathetic look as of a dog asking to be forgiven. With a sudden strange impulse she seized his hand, and drew it up to her lips. He snatched it away ashamed and remorseful, but she recap-

tured it, and began stroking it gently, tenderly: and all the while her spare, narrow shoulders shook with spasms of uncontrolled sobbing, just like a child after it has had a big, big cry. Then suddenly the smile vanished from her face, the tender look from her eyes, and an expression of horror crept into them as they fastened themselves upon his hand.

"That ring, Bertrand," she cried hoarsely, "take it off."

"My father's ring?" he asked. "I want to wear it."

"No, no, don't wear it, my dear lamb," his mother entreated, and moaned piteously just as if she were in pain. "Your grandmother took it off his dear, dead hand—oh, she is cruel—cruel—and without mercy . . . she took it off after she—— Oh, my boy! my boy! will you ever forgive?"

His one thought was just to comfort her. Awhile ago, when first his grandmother had told him, he had felt bitterly sore. His father dying a shameful death by his own hand! The shame of it was almost intolerable! And in the brief seconds that elapsed between the terrible revelation and the moment when he had to expend all his energies in looking after his mother, had held a veritable inferno of humili-

ation for him. As in a swift and sudden vision he saw flitting before him all sorts of little signs and indications that had puzzled him in the past, but of which he had ceased to think almost as soon as they had occurred, a look of embarrassment here, one of pity there, his grandmother's sneers, his mother's entreaties. He saw it all, all of a sudden. People who knew pitied him—or else they sneered. The bitterness of it had been awful. But now he forgot all that. With his mother lying there so crushed, so weak, so helpless, all that was noble and chivalrous in his nature gained the upper hand over his resentment.

"It is not for me to forgive, mother dear," he said, "I am not my father's judge."

"He was so kind and good," the poor soul went on with pathetic eagerness, "so generous. He only borrowed in order to give to others. People were always sponging on him. He never could say no—to any one—and of course we had no money to spare, to give away. . . ."

Bertrand frowned.

"So," he said quite quietly, "he—my father—borrowed some? He—he had debts?"

"Yes."

"Many?"

"Alas."

"He—he did not pay them before he——?"

Marcelle de Ventadour slowly shook her head.

"And," Bertrand asked, "since then? since my father—died, have his debts been paid?"

"We could not pay them," his mother replied in a tone of dull, aching hopelessness, "we had no money. Your grandmother——"

"Grandmama," he broke in, "said though we were poor, we could yet afford to entertain our relatives as befitted our rank. How can that be if—if we are still in debt?"

"Your grandmother is quite right, my dear boy, quite right." Marcelle de Ventadour argued with pathetic eagerness; "she knows best. We must do our utmost—we must all do our very utmost to bring about your marriage with Rixende de Peyron-Bompar. Your great-aunt has set her heart on it, she has—she has, I know, made it a condition—your grandmother knows about it—she and Mme. de Mont-Pahon have talked it over together—Mme. de Mont-Pahon will make you her legatee on condition that you marry Rixende."

For a moment or two Bertrand said nothing. He had jumped to his feet and stood at the

foot of the couch, with head bent and a deep frown on his brow.

"I wish you had not told me that, mother," he said.

"Why not?"

"I love Rixende, and now it will seem as if——"

"As if what?"

"As if I wooed her for the sake of Mme. de Mont-Pahon's money."

"That is foolishness, Bertrand," Mme. de Ventadour said, with more energy than was habitual to her. "Let us suppose that I said nothing. And your grandmother may be wrong. Mme. de Mont-Pahon may only wish for the marriage because of her affection for you and Rixende."

"You wish it, too, mother, of course?" Bertrand said.

The mother drew a deep sigh of longing.

"Wish it, my dear?" she rejoined. "Wish it? Why, it would turn the hell of my life into a real heaven!"

"Even though," he insisted, "even though until that marriage is accomplished, we cannot hope to pay off any of my father's debts, even though for the next year, at least, we must go on spending more money and more money,

borrow more and more, to keep me idling in Paris and to throw dust in the eyes of Mme. de Mont-Pahon."

"We must do it, Bertrand," she said earnestly. "Your grandmother says that we have to think of our name, not of ourselves; that it is the future that counts, and not the present."

"But you, mother, what is your idea about it all?"

"Oh, I, my dear? I? I count for so little—what does it matter what I think?"

"It matters a lot to me."

Marcelle de Ventadour sighed again. For a moment it seemed as if she would make of her son a confidant of all her hopes, her secret longings, her spiritless repinings; as if she would tell him of what she thought and what she planned during those hours and days that she spent on her couch, listless and idle. But the habits of a lifetime cannot be shaken off in a moment, even under the stress of great emotion, and Marcelle had been too long under the domination of her mother-in-law to venture on an independent train of thought.

"My dear lamb," she said tenderly; "I only pray for your happiness—and I feel that your grandmother knows best."

Bertrand gave a quick, impatient little sigh.

"What we have to do," his mother resumed more calmly after a while, "is to try and wipe away the shame that clings around your father's memory."

"We cannot do that unless we pay what we owe," he retorted.

"We cannot do that, Bertrand," she rejoined earnestly. "We have not the money. At the time of—of your father's death the creditors took everything from us that they could: we were left with nothing—nothing but this old owl's nest. It, too, had been heavily mortgaged, but—but a—but a kind friend paid off the mortgage, then allowed us to stay on here."

"A kind friend," Bertrand asked. "Who?"

"I—don't know," his mother replied after an imperceptible moment's hesitation. "Your grandmother knows about it, she has always kept control of our money. We must leave it to her. She knows best."

Then, as Bertrand relapsed into silence, she insisted more earnestly:

"You do think that your grandmother knows best, do you not, Bertrand?"

"Perhaps," he said with an impatient sigh, and turned away.

It was then that he caught sight of Micheline

—Micheline who, as was her wont, had withdrawn silently into the nearest window recess, and had sat there, patient and watchful, until such time as it pleased some one to take notice of her.

“Micheline,” Bertrand said, “have you been here all the time?”

“All the time,” she replied simply.

“It is getting late,” he remarked, and gazed out of the window to distant Luberon, behind whose highest peak the sunset had already lighted his crimson fire.

“Too late to go over to the mas this afternoon,” he added decisively.

A look of great joy lit up Micheline’s peaky little face.

“Then you are coming, Bertrand,” she cried impulsively.

“Not to-night,” he said, “because it is late. But to-morrow we’ll go together. I would like to—to thank Jaume Deydier for——”

“Oh, my dear,” his mother broke in anxiously, “there is nothing for which you need thank Jaume Daydier. Your grandmother would not wish it.”

“No one,” Bertrand said emphatically, “may dictate to me on a point of honour. I

know where my duty lies. To-morrow I am going to the mas."

Marcelle de Ventadour's pale face took on an expression of painful anxiety.

"If she thought I had said anything," she murmured.

Bertrand bent down and kissed her tenderly.

"Grandmama shall know nothing," he said reassuringly; "but for once I must act as I wish, not as she commands. As you said just now, mother dear, we must not think of ourselves, but of our name, and we must try to wipe away the shame that clings round my father's memory."

He tried to say this quietly, with as little bitterness as possible, but in the end his voice broke, and he ran quickly out of the room.

CHAPTER IV

THE DESPATCH

MICHELINE was happy once more. For a little while—oh! a very little while—this afternoon her idol had tottered on the pedestal upon which she had placed him. The brother whom she worshipped, admired, looked up to, with all the ardour and enthusiasm of her reserved nature, was perhaps not quite so perfect as her affection had painted him. He seemed almost as if he were proud and ungrateful, too proud to renew those delicious ties of childish friendship which she, Micheline, looked on as almost sacred.

But Bertrand did not know that it was in truth Jaume Deydier who, during those trying years at St. Cyr, had generously paid the debts which the young cadet had thoughtlessly contracted—dragged as he had been into a vortex of fashionable life where every one of his comrades was richer than he. Bertrand, driven to distraction by the pressure of monetary difficulties, had confessed to Micheline,

and Micheline had quite naturally gone with the sad story to her bosom friend, Nicolette. She had wept, and Nicolette had wept, and the two girls fell into one another's arms and then thought and planned how best Bertrand could be got out of his difficulties without reference to grandmama. And lo! and behold, Bertrand presently received five thousand francs from his dear sister Micheline. They were, she darkly hinted, the proceeds of certain rigid economies which she had effected in the management of her pin-money. Bertrand accepted both money and explanation without much compunction, but unfortunately through his own indiscretion, grandmama got to hear of his debts and of the five thousand francs. It was, of course, impossible to deceive grandmama for long. Within half an hour the true secret of Bertrand's benefactor was wrung out of the unwilling Micheline.

That a young Comte de Ventadour should make debts whilst he was at St. Cyr was a perfectly proper and natural state of things; avarice or thrift would have been a far greater crime in the eyes of the old Comtesse, than the borrowing of a few thousands from bourgeois tradesmen who could well afford it, without much knowledge as to how those thou-

sands would be repaid. Therefore she never thought of blaming Bertrand. On the other hand, she was very severe with Micheline, not so much for having aroused Nicolette's sympathy on behalf of Bertrand, as for continuing this friendship with the people at the mas, which she—grandmama—thought degrading. And there the matter ended.

Jaume Deydier was passing rich—was the old Comtesse's argument—he and his forbears had enriched themselves at the expense of their feudal lords, grabbing their lands whenever opportunity arose. No doubt the present owner of those splendid estates which once had belonged to the Comtes de Ventadour, felt some compunction in knowing that the present scion of that ancient race was in financial difficulties, and no doubt, too, that his compunction led to a tardy liberality. It all was perfectly right and just. Margarita de Ventadour's own arguments completely eased her conscience. But she did not enlighten Bertrand. The boy was hot-headed, he might do something foolish and humiliating. The money must be accepted as a matter of course: grandmama outwardly must know nothing about it. Nor Bertrand.

And so Bertrand was kept in the dark as

to this and other matters which were far more important.

Even to-day he had been told nothing: he had only guessed. A word from Micheline about St. Cyr, one from his mother about the kind friend who had saved the old château from the hands of the creditors had set his young mind speculating, but that was all.

There was much of his grandmother's temperament in Bertrand; much of that racial pride of family and arrogance of caste, which not even the horrors of the Revolution had wholly eradicated. But underlying that pride and arrogance there were in Bertrand de Ventadour some fine aspirations and impulses of manhood and chivalry, such as the one which caused him to declare his intention of visiting Jaume Deydier immediately.

Micheline was now quite happy: for a little while she had almost thought the beloved brother vain and ungrateful. Now her heart was already full of excuses for him. He was coming on the morrow with her to see Nicolette. It was perhaps a little late to-day. They had their dinner early at the mas, and it would not do to interrupt them all at their meal. But to-morrow she and Bertrand would go over in the morning, and spend a

long, happy day in the dear old house, or in the garden under the shade of the wild vine just as they used to do in the past.

The evening was a glorious one. It seemed as if summer, in these her declining days, was donning her most gorgeous garb to dazzle the eyes of mortals, ere she sank, dying into the arms of autumn. One or two early frosts had touched the leaves of the mountain-ash with gold and the hips and haws on the wild rose-bushes were of a dazzling crimson. And so good to eat!

Micheline who was quite happy now, was picking them in big baskets full to take over to Margai, who made such delicious preserves from them. Overhead the starlings were making a deafening noise; the olives were plentiful this year and very nearly ripe, and a flock of these chattering birds had descended upon the woods around the château and were eating their fill. The evening was drawing in rapidly, in this land where twilight is always short. Luberon frowning and majestic had long since hidden the glory of the setting sun, and way out to the east the moon, looking no more substantial than a small round fluffy cloud, gave promise of a wonderful night. Looking straight across the valley Micheline

could glimpse the whitewashed walls of the old mas gleaming, rose-tinted by the after-glow, above the terraced gradients, and through the curtains of dwarf olive trees. She knew that at a certain window into which a climbing crimson rose peeped in, blossom-laden, Nicolette would be sitting at this hour, gazing across the valley to the towers of the old château where she had spent so many happy days in the past. It almost seemed to Micheline that despite the distance she could see, in a framework of tangled roses, Nicolette's brown curls turned to gold by the last kiss of the setting sun, and down in the garden the arbour draped in a mantle of disorderly vine, which flaunted its riotous colours, its purples and chromes and crimsons, in the midst of the cool grey-greens of stately pine and feathery mimosa. Anon, scared by the sudden sharp report of a distant gun, the host of starlings rose with strident cries and like a thin black cloud spread itself over the mountain-side, united and disintegrated and united again, then vanished up the valley. After which all was still.

Micheline put down her basket and throwing out her frail, flat chest she breathed into her lungs the perfumed evening air, fragrant

with the scent of lavender and wild thyme: and with a gesture of tenderness and longing, she spread out her arms, as if she would enfold in a huge embrace all that was beautiful and loving, and tender in this world that, hitherto, had held so few joys for her. And while she stood, thus silent and entranced, there descended upon the wide solitude around the perfect mysterious hush of evening, that hush which seems most absolute at this hour when the crackling, tiny twigs on dead branches shiver at touch of the breeze, and the hum of cockchafers fills the air with its drowsy buzz.

Suddenly Micheline's attention was arrested by strange happenings on the road, way down below. A horseman had come in sight. When Micheline first caught sight of him, he was riding at full speed, but presently he checked his horse and looked about him, after which he deliberately turned up the rough road which led, winding up the mountain-side, to the gate of the château.

The man was dressed in a bottle-green coat which had some gold lace about it; he wore drab breeches and his boots and coat were powdered with dust as if he had come a long way. Micheline also noted that he had a leather wallet slung by a strap around his

shoulders. Anon a sharp turn in the road hid the horseman from view.

The young girl was conscious of a pleasant thrill of expectation. Visitors at the old château were a rare occurrence, and the lonely rider was obviously coming here, as the rough road led nowhere else. Though she could no longer see him, she could hear the thud of the horse's hoofs drawing nearer every moment.

The main entrance of the château was through a monumental door in the square tower, contiguous to the wing that held the habitable rooms. This tower and door being on the other side of the building from where Micheline was standing, she could not possibly hope to see what would happen, when presently the visitor would request admittance. This being a quite unendurable proposition, Micheline, forgetting the hips and haws, as well as her own dignity, hurried round the château and was just in time to see Jasmin shuffling across the courtyard and the rider drawing rein, and turning in the saddle in order to ask him a question with the air of a man who had never been accustomed to wait.

Micheline caught the sound of her brother's name.

"M. le Comte de Ventadour," the visitor

was saying to Jasmin, "lieutenant in the first company of His Majesty's bodyguard."

"It is here, monsieur," Jasmin replied, "but M. le Comte——"

"M. le Comte de Ventadour," Micheline broke in eagerly, as the new-comer himself rapidly jumped out of the saddle, "is within. Would you wish, monsieur, to speak with him?"

The man saluted in correct military style.

"I am," he said, "the bearer of an urgent despatch to M. le Comte."

"Ah?"

All at once Micheline felt her excitement give way to prosaic anxiety. An urgent despatch? What could it mean?

"Give yourself the trouble to enter, monsieur," she said.

The big front door was always on the latch (there was nothing to tempt the foot-pad or the housebreaker in the château de Ventadour) and Micheline herself pushed it open. The mysterious visitor having carefully fastened his horse to the iron ring in the outside wall, followed the young girl into the vast, bare hall. She was beginning to feel a little frightened.

"Will you be pleased to walk up, mon-

sieur?" she asked. "Jasmin will go and call M. le Comte."

"By your leave, Mademoiselle," the messenger replied, "I will wait here for M. le Comte's pleasure."

There was nothing for it but to send Jasmin upstairs to go and tell Bertrand; and alas! there was no excuse for Micheline to wait and hear what the urgent despatch might be about. She certainly felt anxious, as such a thing had never occurred before. No one at the old owl's nest ever received urgent despatches from anywhere. Dragging her lame leg slowly across the hall, Micheline went, hoping against hope that Bertrand would be down soon before she had reached the top of the stairs, so that she could hear the visitor deliver his message. But Jasmin was slow, or Bertrand difficult to find. However slowly Micheline moved along, she was across the hall and up the stairs at one end of the gallery before Bertrand appeared at the other. Jasmin preceded him, carrying a candle. It was now quite dark, only through the tall oriel window at the top of the stairs the moon sent a pale, wan ray of light. Micheline could no longer see the mysterious messenger: the gloom had swallowed him up completely, but

she could hear Bertrand's footsteps descending the stone stairs and Jasmin shuffling along in front of him. She could see the flicker of candlelight on the great bare walls, the forged iron banister, the tattered matting on the floor, which had long since replaced the magnificent Aubusson carpet of the past.

The whole scene had become like a dream. Micheline leaning against the balustrade of the gallery, strained her ears to listen. She only caught snatches of what the man was saying because he spoke in whispers. Jasmin had put the candle down upon the table, and then had shuffled quietly away. At one time Micheline heard the rustle of paper, at another an exclamation from Bertrand. In the end Bertrand said formally:

"And where do you go after this?"

"Straight back to Avignon, mon lieutenant," the man replied, "to report."

"You can say I will start in the morning."

"At your service, mon lieutenant."

A moment or two later Micheline heard the click of the man's spurs as he saluted and turned to go, then the ring of his footsteps upon the flagged floor: finally the opening and closing of the great entrance door, Bertrand calling to Jasmin, the clink of metal and

creaking of leather, the champing of bit and clang of iron hoofs. The messenger had gone, and Bertrand was still lingering in the hall. Micheline craned her neck and saw him standing beside the heavy oak table. The light of the candle flickered about him, throwing a warm fantastic glow and weird distorting shadows upon his face, his hands, the paper which he held between his fingers, and in which he seemed wholly absorbed. After a few moments which appeared like an eternity to the watching girl, he folded the paper and slipped it into his pocket. Then he turned to cross the hall. Micheline met him at the top of the stairs.

"What is it, Bertrand?" she asked breathlessly. "I am so anxious."

He did not know she was there, and started when he heard her voice. But at once he took hold of her hand and patted it reassuringly.

"There is nothing to be anxious about, little sister," he said, "but I shall have to leave here to-morrow."

"Yes," she said, "but why?"

"A message came through by the new aerial telegraph to Avignon. More troops have left for Spain. All leaves are cancelled. I have to rejoin my regiment at once."

"But," she exclaimed, "you are not going to the war?"

"I am afraid not," he replied with a touch of bitterness. "If the King's bodyguard was to be sent to the front it would mean that France was once more at her last gasp."

"There is no fear of that?"

"None whatever."

"Then why should you say that you are afraid that you are not going to the war?" Micheline asked, and her eyes, the great pathetic eyes of a hopeless cripple, fastened on the brother's face a look of yearning anxiety. The ghostly light of the moon came shyly peeping in through the tall, open window: it fell full upon his handsome young face, which wore a perturbed, spiritless look.

"Well, little sister," he said dejectedly, "life does not hold such allurements for me, does it, that I should cling desperately to it?"

"How can you say that, Bertrand?" the girl retorted. "You love Rixende, do you not?"

"With all my soul," he replied fervently.

"And she loves you?"

"I believe so," he said with a strange unaccountable sigh; "I do firmly believe," he added slowly, "that Rixende loves me."

“Well then?”

To this he made no reply, and anon passed his hand across his forehead.

“You are right, Micheline, I have no right to talk as I do—to feel as I feel to-night—dispirited and discouraged. All the world smiles to me,” he added with a sudden outburst of liveliness, which may perhaps not have rung quite true in the anxious sister’s ears. “I love Rixende, Rixende loves me; I am going to inherit tante Sybille’s millions, and dejection is a crime. So now let us go to mother and break the news of my departure to her. I shall have to leave early in the morning, little sister. We’ll have to say good-bye to-night.”

“And not say good-bye to Nicolette after all,” Micheline murmured under her breath.

But this Bertrand did not hear.

CHAPTER V

THE SPIRIT OF THE PAST

MOTHER wept, and grandmama was full of wise saws and grandiose speeches. So many gallant officers of the King's Army having gone to Spain, those of His Majesty's bodyguard would be all the more conspicuous at Court, all the more sought after in society.

"And remember, Bertrand," was one of the last things she said to him that night, "when you next come home, Rixende de Peyron-Bompar must pay us a visit too, with that atrocious father of hers."

"But, grandmama——" Bertrand hazarded.

"Tush, boy! do not start on that humiliating subject again. What do you take me for? I tell you Rixende shall be entertained in a style that will not cause you to blush. Besides," she added with a shrug of her aristocratic shoulders, "Sybille insists that Rixende shall see her future home before she will acquiesce in the formal *finançailles*. So put a

good face on it, my boy, and above all, trust to me. I tell you that Rixende's visit here will be a triumph for us all."

Grandmama was so sure, so emphatic, above all so dominating, that Bertrand gratefully followed her lead. After all, he loved his ancestral home, despite its shortcomings. He was proud of it, too. Think of that old Peyron-Bompar, who did not even know who his grandfather was, being brought in contact with traditions that had their origin in Carlovingian times. That the tapestries on the walls were tattered and faded, the curtains bleached to a drab, colourless tone, the carpets in holes, the masonry tumbling to ruins, was but a glorious evidence of the antiquity of this historic château. Bertrand was proud of it. He longed to show it to Rixende, and to stand with her in the great ancestral hall, where hung the portraits of his glorious forbears. Rambaud de Ventadour, the friend of the Grand Monarque, Guilhem de Ventadour, the follower of St. Louis, and Rixende, surnamed Riande—because she was always laughing, and whose beauty had rivalled that of Montepan.

Even to-night he paid a visit to those beloved portraits. He seemed to want to steep

himself in tradition, and the grandeur and chivalry which was his richest inheritance. The great hall looked vast and silent in the gloom, like the graveyard of glorious dead. The darkness was mysterious, and filled him with a delicious awe: through the tall windows the moonlight came peeping in, spectral and wan, and Bertrand would have been neither surprised nor frightened if, lured by that weird light, the ghosts of his forbears were to step out of the lifeless canvases and march in solemn procession before him, bidding him remember that he was one of them, one of the imperishable race of the Ventadours, and that his chief aim in life must be to restore the name and family to their former glory.

Grandmama was quite right when she said that the time had now come when the individual must cease to count, and everything be done for the restoration of the family to its former importance. He himself must be prepared to sacrifice his noblest impulses to the common cause. Thank God! his heart was not in conflict with his duty. He loved Rixende, the very woman whom it was his duty to marry, and this urgent call back to Versailles had been thrice welcome, since it would take him back to his beloved one's side, at least one

month before he had hoped to return. A pang of remorse shot through his heart, however, when he thought of the mas: of Jaume Deydier, who had been a kind friend to his mother in the hour of her distress, and of Nicolette, the quaint, chubby child, who was wont to worship him so. Quite unaccountably his memory flew back to that late afternoon five years ago, when, troubled and perplexed, very much as he was now, he had suddenly thought of Nicolette, and felt a strange, indefinable yearning for her, just as he did now.

And almost unconsciously he found himself presently wandering through the woods. The evening air was warm and fragrant and so clear, so clear in the moonlight that every tiny twig and delicate leaf of olive and mimosa cast a sharp, trenchant shadow as if carved with a knife.

Poor little Nicolette! She had been a pretty child, and her admiration for him, Bertrand, had been one of the nicest traits in her character. He had not seen her since that moment, five years ago, when she stood leaning against the gate with the riotous vine as a background to her brown curls, and the lingering twilight defining her arms and the white shift which she wore. He supposed

that she must have grown, and, in truth, she must have altered a good deal, during her stay at the convent-school in Avignon. No doubt, too, her manners would have improved; she had been rather tomboyish and very childish in her ideas. Poor little Nicolette! No doubt she would feel hurt that he had not been over to the mas, but it had been difficult, very difficult; and he really meant to go on the morrow with Micheline, if this urgent despatch had not come for him to return to duty at once. Poor little Nicolette!

Then all at once he saw her. Absorbed in thought he had wandered on and on without realising that he had gone so far. And now he found himself down in the Valley of the Lèze, picking his way on the rough stones left high and dry during the summer in the river bed. And there in front of him was the pool with the overhanging carob tree, and beside it stood Nicolette. He recognised her at once, even though the light of the moon only touched her head and neck and the white fichu which she wore about her shoulders. She seemed very different from the child whom he remembered, for she looked tall and slender, and her brown curls did not tumble all about her face as they were wont to do; some of

them did still fall over her forehead and ears, and their delicate tendrils glistened like chestnuts in the mysterious light, but the others were hidden under the quaint head-dress, the small, round knob of muslin which she wore over the crown of her head like most Provençal maidens.

Whether she had expected him or not, Bertrand could not say. At sight of him she gave a little cry of delight and ran forward to greet him.

"Bertrand," she exclaimed, "I knew that you would come."

In the olden days, she used, when she saw him, to run to him and throw her arms round his neck. She also would have said "Tan-tan" in the olden days. This time, however, she put out her hand, and it also seemed quite natural for Bertrand to stoop and kiss it, as if she were a lady. She, however, withdrew her hand very quickly, though not before he had perceived that it was very soft and very warm, and quivered in his grasp just like a little bird.

"How funny to find you here, Nicolette," he said somewhat lamely. "And how you have grown," he added.

"Yes," she said, "Margai thought you would say that when——"

"I was coming over with Micheline tomorrow," he broke in quickly. "It was all arranged."

Her face lit up with a wonderful expression of relief and of joy.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "I knew—I knew——"

Bertrand smiled, for she looked so happy.

"What did you know, Nicolette?" he asked.

"Margai said you would not come to see us, because you were too proud, now that you were an officer of the King's guard. Time went on, and even father said——"

"But you knew better, eh, little one?"

"I knew," she said simply, "that you would not turn your back on old friends."

He felt so ashamed of himself that he could not say anything for the moment. Indeed, he felt foolish, standing here beside this village girl with that silly peasant's head-dress on her head, who, nevertheless, had the power to make him feel mean and ungrateful. She seemed to be waiting for him to say something, but as he appeared moody and silent, she went on after a while.

"Margai will have to bake a very large

brioche to-morrow as a punishment for having doubted you."

"Nicolette," he rejoined dejectedly, "I cannot come to-morrow."

"Then the next day—why! it will be Sunday, and father's birthday, we will . . ."

He shook his head. He dared not meet her eyes, those great hazel eyes of hers, which had golden lights in them just like a topaz. He knew that the expression of joy had gone out of them, and that the tears were beginning to gather. So he just put his hand in his pocket and drew out the letter which the soldier-messenger had brought from Avignon.

"It was all arranged," he said haltingly, "Micheline and I were coming over to-morrow. I wanted to see your father and—and thank him, and I longed to see you, Nicolette, and dear old Margai—but a messenger came with this, a couple of hours ago."

He held out the paper to her, but she did not take it.

"It is very dark," she said simply. "I could not read it. What does it say?"

"That by order of His Majesty the King, Lieutenant Comte de Ventadour must return to duty at once."

"Does that mean," she said, "that you must go away?"

"Early to-morrow morning, alas!"

She said nothing more for the moment, and with a sigh he slipped the paper back into his pocket. The situation was uncomfortable, and Bertrand felt vaguely irritated. His nerves were on edge. Everything around him was so still that the sudden flutter of a bird in the branches of the olive tree gave him an uneasy start. Only the murmur of the Lèze on its narrow rocky bed broke the silence of the valley, and far away the cooing of a wood-pigeon settling down to rest. Bertrand would have liked to say something, but the words choked him before they were uttered. He would have liked to speak lightly of the days of long ago, of Paul et Virginie, and their desert island. But he could not. Everything around him seemed to reproach him for his apathy and his indifference; the carob tree, and the boulder from the top of which he used to fish, the crest of the old olive tree with the hollow trunk that was Paul et Virginie's island home, the voice of the wood-pigeon, and the sougning of the night breeze through the delicate branches of the pines. And above all, the scent of rosemary, of wild thyme and

sweet marjoram that filled the air, gave him a sense of something irretrievable, of something that he, with a callous hand, was wilfully sweeping away.

"I am sorry, Bertrand, that you cannot come to the mas," Nicolette said after a moment or two, which to Bertrand seemed like an hour, "but duty is duty. We must hope for better luck next time."

Her quick, measured voice broke the spell that seemed to be holding him down. Bertrand drew a deep sigh of relief. What a comfort that she was so sensible, poor Nicolette!

"You understand, don't you, Nicolette?" he said lamely.

"Of course I do," she replied. "Father will be sorry, but he, too, will understand."

"And Margai?" he asked lightly.

She smiled.

"Oh!" she said, "you know what Margai is, always grumbling and scolding. Age has not softened her temper, nor hardened her heart."

Then they looked at one another. Bertrand murmured "Good old Margai!" and laughed, and Nicolette laughed in response. She was quite gay now. Oh! she was undoubtedly changed! Five years ago she

would have cried if she thought Bertrand was going away and she would not see him for a time. She would not have made a scene, but she would have cried. Now she scarcely seemed to mind. Bertrand had been a fool to worry as to what she would think or do. She began asking him questions quite naturally about his life at the Court, about the King and the Queen. She even asked about Mademoiselle de Peyron-Bompar, and vowed she must be even more beautiful than the lovely Lady of the Laurels. But Bertrand was in that lover-like state when the name of the loved one seems almost too sacred to be spoken by another's lips. So the subject of Rixende was soon dropped, and Nicolette chatted of other things.

Bertrand felt that he was losing control over his nerves. He felt an ever-growing strange irritation against Nicolette. In this elusive moonlight she seemed less and less like the girl he had known, the podgy little tom-boy who used to run after him crying for "Tan-tan"; less of a woman and more of a sprite, a dweller of these woods, whose home was in the hollow trunks of olive trees, and who bathed at dawn in the mountain stream, and wound sprigs of mimosa in her hair. Anon, when she laugh-

ingly taunted him about his good fortunes with the lovely ladies of Versailles, he ordered her sharply to be silent.

At one time he tried to speak to her about their island, their wonderful life of make-believe: he tried to lead her back to the carob tree and to recapture with her for an instant the spirit of the past. But she seemed to have forgotten all about the island, and deliberately turned to walk away from it, back along the stony shore of the Lèze, never once glancing behind her, even when he laughingly declared that a ship had appeared upon the horizon, and they must hoist up the signal to draw her lookout man's attention to their desert island.

Bertrand did not walk with her as far as the mas. Nicolette herself declared that it was too late; father would be abed, and Margai was sure to be cross. So they parted down on the road, Bertrand declaring that he would stand there and watch until he knew that she was safely within.

"How foolish of you, Bertrand," she said gaily. "Why should you watch? I am often out much later than this."

"But not with me," he said.

"Then what must I do to reassure you?"

"Put a light in your bedroom window. I would see it from here."

"Very well," she assented with a careless shrug of the shoulders. "Good night, Bertrand."

"Good-bye, Nicolette."

He took her hand and drew her to him. He wanted to kiss her just as he used to do in the past, but with a funny little cry she evaded him, and before he could detain her, she had darted up the slope, and was bounding upwards from gradient to gradient like a young antelope on the mountain-side.

Bertrand stood quite still watching the glint of her white cap and her fichu between the olive trees. She seemed indeed a sprite: he could not see her feet, but her movements were so swift that he was sure they could not touch the ground, but that she was floating upwards on the bosom of a cloud. The little white cap from afar looked like a tiny light on the crown of her head and the ends of her fichu trailed behind her like wings. Soon she was gone. He could no longer see her. The slope was steep and the scrub was dense. It had enfolded her and hidden her as the wood hides its nymphs, and the voice of the mountain stream mocked him because his eyes were not

keen enough to see. Overhead the stars with myriads of eyes could watch her progress up the heights, whilst he remained below and could no longer see. But the air remained fragrant with the odour of dried lavender and sun-kissed herbs, and from the woods around there came in sweet, lulling waves, wafted to his nostrils, the scent of rosemary which is for remembrance.

Bertrand waited awhile. The moon veiled her radiance behind a mantle of gossamer clouds, which she had tinged with lemon-gold, the sharp, trenchant shadows of glistening lights gave place to a uniform tone of silvery-grey. The trees sighed and bowed their crests under a sudden gust of wind, which came soughing down the valley, and all at once the air grew chill as if under a breath from an ice-cold mouth. Bertrand shivered a little and buttoned his coat. He thought that Nicolette must have reached the mas by now. Perhaps Margai was keeping her talking downstairs, or she had forgotten to put her light in her bedroom window.

Perhaps the trees had grown of late and were obstructing the view, or perhaps he had made a mistake and from where he stood the windows of the mas could not be seen. It was

so long, so very long ago since he had been here, he had really forgotten his bearings.

And with a shrug of the shoulders he turned to walk away.

But over at the mas Nicolette had thrown her arms around old Margaï's shoulders:

"Thou wert wrong, Margaï," she cried, "thou wert wrong. He meant to come. He wished to come. He had decided to come to-morrow——"

"Ta, ta, ta," Margaï broke in crossly, "what is all that nonsense about now? And why those glistening eyes, I would like to know. Who is it that had decided to come to-morrow?"

"Tan-tan, of course!" Nicolette cried, and clapped her hands together, and her dark eyes glistened, glistened with an expression that of a surety the old woman could not have defined.

"Oh! go away with your Tan-tans," Margaï retorted gruffly. "You know you must not say that."

"I'll say M. le Comte then, an thou wilt," the girl retorted, for her joy was not to be marred by any grumblings or wet blankets. "But he was coming here, all the same, whatever thou mayest choose to call him."

"Was he, indeed?"

The old woman was not to be mollified quite so easily, and, all the while that she watched the milk which she had put on the stove to boil for the child, she went on muttering to herself:

"Then why doth he not come? Why not, if he meant to?"

"He has been sent for, Margai," Nicolette said with a great air of importance, "by the King."

"As if the King would trouble to send for Tan-tan!" old Margai riposted with a shrug of the shoulders.

Nicolette stood before Margai, drew her round by the arm, forcing her to look her straight in the eyes, then she put up her finger and spoke with a solemn earnestness.

"The King has sent for M. le Comte de Ventadour, Margai. Do not dare to contradict this, because it would be disrespectful to an officer of His Majesty's bodyguard. And the proof of what I say, is that Tan-tan has to start early to-morrow morning for Versailles. If the King had not sent for him he would have come here to see us in the afternoon, and all that thou didst say, Margai, about his being proud and ungrateful is not true, not true," she reiterated, stamping her

foot resolutely upon the ground, then proceeding to give Margai first a good shake, then a kiss, and finally a hug. "Say now, Margai, say at once that it is not true."

"There now the milk is boiling over," was Margai's only comment upon the child's peroration, as she succeeded in freeing herself from Nicolette's clinging arms: after which she devoted her attention to the milk.

And Nicolette ran up to her room, and put her lighted candle in the window. She was humming to herself all the while:

"Janeto gardo si moutoun
En fasent soun bas de coutoun."

But presently the song died down in her throat, she threw herself down on her narrow, little bed, and burying her face in the pillow she burst into tears.

CHAPTER VI

ORANGE-BLOSSOM

AND now it is spring once again: a glorious May-day with the sky of an intense blue, and every invisible atom in the translucent air quivering in the heat of the noon-day sun. All around the country-side the harvesting of orange-blossom has begun, and the whole atmosphere is filled with such fragrance that the workers who carry the great baskets filled to the brim with ambrosial petals feel the intoxicating perfume rising to their heads like wine.

At the mas they are harvesting the big grove to-day, the one that lies down in the valley, close to the road-side. There are over five hundred trees, so laden with flowers that, even after heavy thinning down, there will be a huge crop of fruit at Christmas-time. Through the fragrant air, the fresh young voices of the gatherers resound, echoing against the distant hills, chattering, shouting, laughing, oh! laughing all the time, for they

are boys and girls together and all are betrothed to one another in accordance to old Provençal traditions which decrees that lads and maidens be tokened from the time when they emerge out of childhood and the life of labour on a farm begins: so that Meon is best known as the betrothed of Pétrone or Magdeleine as the fiancée of Gaucelme.

Large sheets are spread under the trees, and the boys, on ladders, pick the flowers and drop them lightly down. It requires a very gentle hand to be a good picker, because the delicate petals must on no account be bruised and all around the trees where the girls stand, holding up the sheet, the air is filled as with myriads of sweet-scented fluttering snow-flakes.

Jaume Deydier, in addition to his special process for the manufacture of olive oil, has a secret one for the extraction of neroli, a sweet oil obtained from orange-blossom, and for distilling orange-flower water, a specific famed throughout the world for the cure of those attacks of nerves to which great ladies are subject. Therefore, at the mas, the fragrant harvest is of great importance.

And what a feast it is for the eye. Beneath the brilliant canopy above, a veritable

riot of colour, an orgy of movement and of life! There stands Jaume Deydier himself in blouse and linen trousers, out from earliest dawn, tablets and pencil in hand, counting and checking the bags as they are carried from the grove to the road, where a row of carts is waiting to convey them to the distillery at Pertuis: the horses are gorgeously decked out with scarlet and blue ribbons plaited into their manes and tails, the bosses on their harness scintillating like gold in the sunshine: their drivers with bunches of lilac or lily-of-the-valley tied to their whips. Then the girls in red or pink or green kirtles, the tiny muslin caps on their heads embellished with a sprig of blue gentian or wild geranium that nestles against their curls or above the heavy plaits that hang like streamers down their backs; and the lads in grey or blue blouses, with gay kerchiefs tied loosely round their necks, and through it all from time to time a trenchant note of deep maroon or purple, a shawl, a kerchief, a piece of embroidery; or again 'tis M. le Curé's soutane, a note of sober black, as he moves from group to group, admonishing, chaffing, bestowing blessings as he goes by, his well-worn soutane held high above his

buckled shoes, his three-cornered hat pushed back above his streaming forehead.

"Eh! Mossou le Curé!" comes in a ringing shout from a chorus of young voices, "this way, Mossou le Curé, this way! bless this tree for us that it may yield the heaviest crop of the year."

For there is a dole on every tree, according to the crop it yields to deft fingers, and M. le Curé hurries along, raises his wrinkled hand and murmurs a quick blessing, whilst for a minute or two dark heads and fair are bent in silent reverence and lips murmur a short prayer, only to break the next moment into irresponsible laughter again.

And in the midst of this merry throng Nicolette moves—the fairest, the merriest of all. She has pinned a white camellia into her cap: it nestles against her brown curls on the crown of her head, snow-white with just a splash or two of vivid crimson on the outer petals. Ameyric Barnadou is in close attendance upon her. He is the most desirable *parti* in the neighbourhood for he is the only son of the rich farmer over at La Bastide, who is also the mayor of the commune, and a well-set up, handsome lad with bold, dark eyes calculated to bring a quick blush to any damask

cheek. Glances of admiration and approval were freely bestowed on the young couple: and more than one sigh of longing or regret followed them as they moved about amongst the trees, for Ameyric had eyes only for Nicolette.

Nicolette had in truth grown into a very beautiful woman, with the rich beauty of the South, the sun-kissed brown hair, and mellow, dark hazel eyes, with a gleam in them beneath their lashes, as of a golden topaz. That she was habitually cool and distant with the lads of the country-side—some said that she was proud—made her all the more desirable to those who, like Ameyric, made easy conquests where they chose to woo. So far, certainly Nicolette had not been known to favour any one, and it was in vain that her girl friends teased her, calling her: Nicolette, no man's fiancée.

To-day with a background of light colour, with the May-day sun above her, and the scent of orange-blossom in his nostrils, Ameyric Barnadou felt that life would be for him a poor thing indeed if he could not share it with Nicolette. But though he found in his simple poetic soul, words of love that should have melted a heart of stone, exquisite Nicolette did no more than smile upon him with a gentle

kind of pity, which was exasperating to his pride and fuel to his ardour.

"Nicolette," Ameyric pleaded at one time when he had succeeded by dint of clever strategy in isolating her from the groups of noisy harvesters, "if you only knew how good it is to love."

She was leaning up against a tree, and the leaves and branches cast trenchant, irregular shadows on her muslin kerchief and the creamy satin of her shoulders: she was twirling a piece of orange-blossom between her fingers and now and then she raised it to her cheeks, caressing it and inhaling its dewy fragrance.

"Don't do that, Nicolette!" the lad cried out with a touch of exasperation.

She turned great, wondering eyes on him.

"What am I doing, Ameyric," she asked, "that irritates you?"

"Letting that flower kiss your cheek," he replied, "when I——"

"Poor Ameyric," she sighed.

"Alas! poor Ameyric!" he assented. "You must think that I am made of stone, Nicolette, or you would not tease me so."

"I?" she exclaimed, genuinely astonished: "I tease you? How?"

But Ameyric had not a great power of ex-

pressing himself. Just now he looked shy, awkward, and mumbled haltingly:

"By—by being you—yourself—so lovely—so fresh—then kissing that flower. You must know that it makes me mad!" he added almost roughly. He tried to capture her hand; but she succeeded in freeing it, and flung the twig away.

"Poor Ameyric," she reiterated with a sigh.

He had already darted after the flower and, kneeling, he picked it up and pressed it to his lips. She looked down on his eager, flushed face, and there crept a soft, almost motherly look in her eyes.

"If you only knew," he said moodily, "how it hurts!"

"Just now you wished me to know how good it was to love," she riposted lightly.

"That is just the trouble, Nicolette," the lad assented, and rose slowly to his feet; "it is good but it also hurts; and when the loved one is unkind, or worse still, indifferent, then it is real hell!"

Then, as she said nothing, but stood quite still, her little head thrown back, breathing in the delicious scented air, which had become almost oppressive in its fragrance, he exclaimed passionately:

"I love you so, Nicolette!"

He put out his arms and drew her to him, longing to fasten his lips on that round white throat, which gleamed like rose-tinted marble.

"Nicolette," he pleaded, because she had pushed him away quickly—almost roughly. "Are you quite sure that you cannot bring yourself to love me?"

"Quite sure," she replied firmly.

"But you cannot go on like this," he argued, "loving no one. It is not natural. Every girl has a lad. Look at them how happy they are."

Instinctively she turned to look.

In truth they were a happy crowd these children of Provence. It was the hour after *déjeuner*, and in groups of half a dozen or more, boys and girls, men and women squatted upon the ground under the orange trees, having polished off their bread and cheese, drunk their wine and revelled in the cakes which Margai always baked expressly for the harvesters. There was an hour's rest before afternoon work began. Every girl was with her lad. Ameyric was quite right: there they were, unfettered in their naïve love-making; the boys for the most part were lying full length on the ground, their hats over their

eyes, tired out after the long morning's work: the girls squatted beside them, teasing, chaffing, laughing, yielding to a kiss when a kiss was demanded, on full red lips or blue-veined, half-closed lids.

Anon, one or two of the men, skilled in music, picked up their galoubets whilst others slung their beribboned tambours round their shoulders. They began to beat time, softly at first, then a little louder, and the soft-toned galoubets intoned the tender melody of "*Lou Roussignou*" ("The Nightingale"), one of the sweetest of the national songs of Provence. And one by one the fresh young voices of men and maids also rose in song, and soon the mountains gave echo to the sweet, sad tune, with its quaint burden and its haunting rhythm, and to the clapping of soft, moist hands, the droning of galoubets and murmur of tambours.

"Whence come you, oh, fair maiden?
The nightingale that flies,
Your arm with basket laden,
The nightingale that flies. that flies,
Your arm with basket laden,
The nightingale that soon will fly."

One young voice after another took up the refrain, and soon the sound rose and rose

higher and ever higher, growing in magnitude and volume till every mountain crag and every crevasse on distant Luberon seemed to join in the chorus, and to throw back in numberless echoes the naïve burden of the song that holds in its music the very heart and soul of this land of romance and of tears.

Nicolette listened for awhile, standing still under the orange tree, with the sun playing upon her hair, drinking in the intoxicating perfume of orange-blossoms that lulled her mind to dreams of what could never, never be. But anon she, too, joined in the song, and as her voice had been trained by a celebrated music-master of Avignon, and was of a peculiarly pure and rich quality, it rose above the quaint, harsh tones that came from untutored throats, until one by one these became hushed, and boys and girls ceased to laugh and to chatter, and listened.

“What ails thee, maiden fair?
The nightingale that flies !
Whence all these tears and care ?
The nightingale that flies, that flies !
Whence all these tear-drops rare ?
The nightingale away will fly !”

sang Nicolette, and the last high note, pure indeed as that of a bird, lingered on the per-

fumed air like a long-drawn-out sigh, then softly died away as if carried to the mountain heights on the wings of the nightingale that flies.

“Lou roussignou che volà—volà !”

A hush had fallen on the merry throng: a happy hush wherein hands sought hands and curly head leaned on willing breast, and lips sought eyes and closed them with a kiss. Nicolette was standing under the big orange tree, her eyes fastened on the slopes of Luberon, where between olive trees and pines rose the dark cypress trees that marked the grounds of the old château. When she ceased to sing some of the lads shouted enthusiastically: “Encore! Encore!” and M. le Curé clapped his hands, and said she must come over to Pertuis and sing at high Mass on the Feast of Pentecost. Jaume Deydier was at great pains to explain how highly the great music-teacher at Avignon thought of Nicolette’s voice; but Ameyric in the meanwhile had swarmed up the big orange tree. It had not yet been picked and was laden with blossom. The fragrance from it was such that it was oppressive, and once Ameyric felt as if he would swoon and fall off the tree. But

this feeling soon passed, and sitting astride upon a bough, he picked off all the blossoms, gathering them into his blouse. 'Then when his blouse was full, he held on to it with one hand, and with the other started pelting Nicolette with the flowers: he threw them down in huge handfuls one after the other, and Nicolette stood there and never moved; she just let the petals fall about her like snow, until Ameyric suddenly loosened the corner of his blouse, and down came the blossoms, buds, flowers, petals, leaves, twigs, and Nicolette had to bend her head lest these struck her in the face. She put up her arms and started to run, but Ameyric was down on the ground and after her within a second. And as he was the swiftest runner of the country-side, he soon overtook her and seized her hand, and went on running, dragging her after him: a lad jumped to his feet and seized her other hand and then dragged another girl after him. The next moment every one had joined in this merry race: young and old, grey heads and fair heads and bald heads, all holding hands and running, running, for this was the *Faran-doulo*, and the whole band was dragged along by Ameyric, who was the leader and who had hold of Nicolette's hand. They ran and they

ran, the long band that grew longer and longer every moment, as one after another every one joined in: the girls, the boys, the men, Jaume Deydier, Margai, and even Mossou le Curé. No one can refuse to join in the *Farandoulo*. In and out of the orange trees, round and round and up and down!—follow my leader!—and woe betide him or her who first gets breathless. The laughter, the shouts were deafening.

“Keep up, Magdeleine!”

“Thou’rt breaking my arm, Glayse!”

“Take care, Mossou le Curé will fall!”

“Fall! No! and if he does we’ll pick him up again!”

And so the mad *Farandoulo* winds its way in the fragrant grove that borders the dusty road. And down that road coming from Luberon two riders—a man and a woman—draw rein, and hold their horses in, while they gaze toward the valley.

“Now, what in Heaven’s name is happening over there?” a high-pitched feminine voice asks somewhat querulously.

“I should not wonder they were dancing a *Farandoulo*!” the man replies.

“What in the world is that?”

"The oldest custom in Provence. A national dance——"

"A dance, *bon Dieu!* I should call it a vulgar brawl!"

"It is quaint and original, Rixende. Come! It will amuse you to watch."

The lady shrugs her pretty shoulders and the riders put their horses to a gentle trot. Bertrand's eyes fixed upon that serpentine band of humanity, still winding its merry way amidst the trees, have taken on an eager, excited glance. The Provençal blood in his veins leaps in face of this ancient custom of his native land. Rixende, smothering her ennui, rides silently by his side. Then suddenly one or two amongst that riotous throng have perceived the riders: the inborn shyness of the peasant before his seigneur seems to check the laughter on their lips, their shyness is communicated to others, and gradually one by one, they fall away; Mossou le Curé, shame-faced, is the first to let go; he mops his streaming forehead and watches with some anxiety the approach of the strange lady in her gorgeous riding habit of crimson velvet, her fair curls half concealed beneath a coquettish *tricorn* adorned with a falling white plume.

"*Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!*" he mutters. "I

trust they did not perceive me. M. le Comte and this strange lady: what will they think?"

"Bah!" Jaume Deydier replies with a somewhat ironic laugh, "'tis not so many years ago that young Bertrand would have been proud to lead the *Farandoulo* himself."

"Ah!" the old curé murmurs with a grave shake of his old head, "but he has changed since then."

"Yes," Deydier assents dryly: "he has changed."

The curé would have said something more, but a loud, rather shrill, cry checks the words on his lips.

"*Mon Dieu!* What has happened?"

Nothing! Only that Ameyric, the leader of the *Farandoulo*, and Nicolette with him had been about the only ones who had not perceived the approach of the elegant riders. It is an understood thing that one by one the band of rioters becomes shorter and shorter, as some fall out, breathless after awhile, and Ameyric, who was half wild with excitement to-day, and Nicolette, whose senses were reeling in the excitement of this wild rush through perfume-laden space went on running, running, for the longer the *Farandoulo* can be kept up by the leaders the greater is the hon-

our that awaits them in the end; and so they ran, these two, until their mad progress was suddenly arrested by a loud, shrill cry, followed less than a second later by another terrified one, and the pawing and clanging of a horse's hoofs upon the hard stony road. Ameyric was only just in time to drag Nicolette, with a violent jerk, away from the spot where she had fallen on her knees right under the hoofs of a scared and maddened animal. The beautiful rider in gorgeous velvet habit was vainly trying to pacify her horse, who, startled by a sudden clash of tambours, was boring and champing and threatening to rear. Rixende, not a very experienced rider, had further goaded him by her screams and by her nervous tugging at the bridle: she did indeed present a piteous spectacle—her elegant hat had slipped down from her head and hung by its ribbon round her neck, her hair had become disarranged and her pretty face looked crimson and hot, whilst her small hands, encased in richly embroidered gloves, clung desperately to the reins. The untoward incident, however, only lasted a few seconds. Already one of Deydier's men had seized the bridle of the fidgety animal and Bertrand, bending over in his saddle, succeeded

not only in quieting the horse, but also in soothing his loved one's temper; he helped her to readjust her hat and to regain her seat, he rearranged the tumbled folds of her skirt, and saw to her stirrup leather and the comfort of her small, exquisitely shod feet.

But Rixende would not allow herself to be coaxed back into good humour.

"These ignorant louts!" she murmured fretfully, "don't they know that their silly din will frighten a highly strung beast?"

"It was an accident, Rixende," Bertrand protested: "and here," he added, "comes M. le Curé to offer you an apology for his flock."

"*Hélas*, mademoiselle," M. le Curé said, with hands held up in genuine concern, as he hurried to greet M. le Comte and his fair companion, "we must humbly beg your pardon for this unfortunate accident. In the heat and excitement of the dance, I fear me the boys and girls lost their heads a bit."

"Lost their heads, M. le Curé," Rixende retorted dryly. "I might have lost my life by what you are pleased to call this unfortunate accident. Had my horse taken the bit between his teeth . . ."

She shrugged her pretty shoulders in order

to express all the grim possibilities that her words had conjured up.

"Oh! Mademoiselle," le curé protested benignly, "with M. le Comte by your side, you were as safe as in your own boudoir; and every lad here knows how to stay a runaway horse."

"Nay!" Mademoiselle rejoined with just a thought of resentment in her tone, "methinks every one was too much occupied in attending to that wench yonder, to pay much heed to me."

For a moment it seemed as if the old priest would say something more, but he certainly thought better of it and pressed his lips tightly together, as if to check the words which perhaps were best left unsaid. Indeed there appeared to be some truth in Rixende's complaint, for while she certainly was the object of Bertrand's tender solicitude, and the old curé stood beside her to offer sympathy and apology for the potential accident, all the boys and girls, the men and women, were crowding around the group composed of Nicolette, Ameyric, Margai and Jaume Deydier.

Nicolette had not been hurt, thanks to Ameyric's promptitude, but she had been in serious danger from the fretful, maddened

horse, whom his rider was powerless to check. She had fallen on her knees and was bruised and shaken, but already she was laughing quite gaily, and joking over her father's anxiety and Margai's fussy ways. Margai was preparing bandages for the bruised knee and a glass of orange flower water for her darling's nerves, whilst rows of flushed and sympathising faces peered down anxiously upon the unwilling patient.

"Eh! Margai, let me be," Nicolette cried, and jumped to her feet, to show that she was in no way hurt. "What a to-do, to be sure. One would think it was I who nearly fell from a horse."

"Women," muttered Margai crossly, "who don't know how to sit a horse should not be allowed to ride."

And rows of wise young heads nodded sagely in assent.

Rixende, watching this little scene from the road, felt querulous and irritated.

"Who," she asked peremptorily, "was that fool of a girl who threw herself between my horse's feet?"

"It was our little Nicolette," the curé replied gently. "The child was running and dancing, and Ameyric dragged her so fast in

the *Farandoulo* that she lost her footing and fell. She might have been killed," the old man added gravely.

"Fortunately I had my horse in hand," Rixende riposted dryly. "'Twas I who might have been killed."

But this last doleful remark of hers Bertrand did not hear. He was at the moment engaged in fastening his horse's bridle to a convenient tree, for at sound of Nicolette's name he had jumped out of the saddle. Nicolette! Poor little Nicolette hurt! He must know, he must know at once. Just for the next few seconds he forgot Rixende, yes! forgot her! and sped across the road and through the orange-grove in the direction of that distant, agitated group, in the midst of which he feared to find poor little Nicolette mangled and bleeding.

Rixende called peremptorily after him. She thought Bertrand indifferent to the danger which she had run, and indifference was a manlike condition which she could not tolerate.

"Bertrand," she called, "Bertrand, come back."

But he did not hear her, which further exasperated her nerves. She turned to the old

curé who was standing by rather uncomfortably, longing for an excuse to go and see how Nicolette was faring.

"M. le Curé," Rixende said tartly, "I pray you tell M. le Comte that my nerves are on edge, and that I must return home immediately. If he'll not accompany me, then must I go alone."

"At your service, mademoiselle," the old priest responded readily enough, and picked up his soutane ready to follow M. le Comte through the grove. For the moment he had disappeared, but a few seconds later the group of harvesters parted and disclosed Bertrand standing beside Nicolette.

"Nicolette!" Bertrand had exclaimed as soon as he saw her. He felt immensely relieved to find that she was not hurt, but at sight of her he suddenly felt shy and awkward; he who was accustomed to meet the grandest and most beautiful ladies of the Court at Versailles.

"Why," he went on with a nervous little laugh, "how you have grown."

Nicolette looked a little pale, which was no wonder, seeing what a fright she had had: but at sight of Bertrand a deep glow ran right up her cheeks, and tinged even her round

young throat down to her shoulders under the transparent fichu. The boys and girls who had been crowding round her fell back respectfully as M. le Comte approached, and even Ameyric stood aside, only Margai and Jaume Deydier remained beside Nicolette.

"You have grown!" Bertrand reiterated somewhat foolishly.

"Do you think so, M. le Comte?" Nicolette murmured shyly.

The fact that she, too, appeared awkward had the effect of dissipating Bertrand's nervousness in the instant.

"Call me Bertrand at once," he cried gaily, "you naughty child who would forget her playmate Bertrand, or Tan-tan if you wish, and give me a kiss at once, or I shall think that you have the habit of turning your back on your friends."

He tried to snatch a kiss, but Nicolette evaded him with a laugh, and at that very moment Bertrand caught sight of Jaume Deydier, whom he greeted a little shamefacedly, but with hearty goodwill. After which it was the turn of Margai, whom he kissed on both cheeks, despite her grumblings and mutterings, and of the boys and girls whom he had

not seen for over five years. Amongst them Ameyric.

"*Eh bien*, Ameyric!" he cried jovially, and held out a cordial hand to the lad: "are you going to beat me at the bar and the disc now that I am out of practice! *Mon Dieu*, what bouts we used to have, what? and how we hated one another in those days!"

Every one was delighted with M. le Comte. How handsome he was! How gay! Proud? Why, no one could be more genial, more kindly than he. He shook hands with all the men, kissed one or two of the prettiest girls and all the old women on both cheeks: even Margai ceased to mutter uncomplimentary remarks about him, and even Jaume Deydier unbent. He admitted to those who stood near him that M. le Comte had changed immensely to his own advantage. And Nicolette leaned against the old orange tree, the doyen of the grove, feeling a little breathless. Her heart was beating furiously beneath her kerchief, because, no doubt, she had not yet rested from that wild *Farandoulo*. The glow had not left her cheeks, and had added a curious brilliance to her eyes. The mad dancing and running had disarranged her hair, and the brown curls

tumbled about her face just as they used to do of old when she was still a child: in her small brown hands she twirled a piece of orange-blossom.

At one moment Bertrand looked round, and their eyes met. In that glance the whole of his childhood seemed to be mirrored: the woods, the long, rafted corridors, the mad, glad pranks of boyhood, the climbs up the mountain-side, the races up the terraced gradients, the slaying of dragons and rescuing of captive maidens. And all at once he threw back his head and laughed, just laughed from the sheer joy of these memories of the past and delight in the present; joy at finding himself here, amidst the mountains of old Provence, whose summits and crags dissolved in the brilliant azure overhead, with the perfume of orange-blossom going to his head like wine.

And because M. le Comte laughed, one by one the boys and girls joined in his merriment: they laughed and sang, no longer the sweet sad chaunt of the "*Rossignou*," but rather the gay ditties of *La Farandoulo*.

"La Farandoulo ? La faren
Lou cor gai la tèsto flourido
E la faren tant que voudren
En aio ! En aio !"

It was, in truth, most unfortunate that it all happened so: for Rixende had watched the whole of the scene from the moment when she sent the old curé peremptorily to order Bertrand to come back to her. But instead of delivering the message he seemed to have mixed himself up with all those noisy louts, and to have become a part of that group that stood gaping around the girl Nicolette. Rixende saw how Bertrand greeted the girl, how he was soon surrounded by a rowdy, chattering throng, she saw how he tried to kiss the girls, how he embraced the women, how happy he seemed amongst all these people: so happy, in fact, that he appeared wholly to have forgotten her, Rixende. And she was forced to wait till it was his good pleasure to remember her. No wonder that this spoilt child of fashionable Versailles lost her temper the while. Her horse was still restive, his boring tired her: she could not trot off by herself, chiefly because she would not have cared to ride alone in this strange and dour country where she was a complete stranger. True! it was selfish and thoughtless of Bertrand thus to forget her. He was only away from her side a few minutes—six at most—but these were magnified into half an hour, and she was really not altogether

to blame for greeting him with black looks, when presently he came back to her, leading that stupid peasant wench by the hand, and speaking just as if nothing had happened, and he had done nothing that required forgiveness.

"This is Nicolette Deydier, my Rixende," he said quite unconcernedly. "Though she is so young, she is my oldest friend. I sincerely hope that you and she——"

"Mademoiselle Deydier and I," Rixende broke in tartly, "can make acquaintance at a more propitious time. But I have been kept too long for conversation with strangers now. I pray you let us go hence, Bertrand; the heat, the sun, and all the noise have given me a headache."

At the first petulant words Nicolette had quietly withdrawn her hand from Bertrand's grasp. She stood by silent, deeply hurt by the other's rudeness, vaguely commiserating with Bertrand for the sorry figure which he was made to cut. He did his best to pacify his somewhat vixenish-tempered fiancée, and in his efforts did certainly forget to make amends to Nicolette, and after a hasty, kindly pressure of her hand, he paid no further heed to her.

Only when Rixende, with a vicious cut at her horse with her riding-crop, gave the signal

for departure, did Bertrand send back a farewell smile to Nicolette. She stood there for a long, long while on the edge of the road; even while a cloud of white dust hid the two riders from her view, she gazed out in the direction where they had vanished.

So this was the lovely Rixende, the woman whom Bertrand had loved even before he had set eyes on her: the lady of his dreams, whom he was going to nickname Riande, because she would be always laughing; and he would love her so much and so tenderly that she would never long for the gaieties of Paris and Versailles, but be content to live with him in his fair home of Provence, where the flower of the gentian in the spring and the dome of heaven above would seem but the mirrors of her blue eyes.

With a tightening at her heart-strings, Nicolette thought of the dainty face with its delicate, porcelain-like skin puckered up with lines of petulance, the gentian-blue eyes with their hard, metallic glitter, and the tiny mouth with the thin red lips set into a pout. And she sighed, because she had also noticed at the same time that there was a look of discontent and weariness in Bertrand's face when he

finally rode away at the bidding of his imperious queen.

“Oh! Holy Virgin, Mother of God,” Nicolette murmured fervently under her breath, “pray to our Lord that He may allow Bertrand to be happy.”

The next moment her father’s voice from the distance roused her from her dreams:

“Nicolette! Hey, Nicolette! Don’t stand there dreaming, child!”

She turned and ran back to the grove; the day was still young, and the harvesters were at work already. But every one noticed that for the rest of the afternoon Mademoiselle Nicolette was more silent than was her wont.

CHAPTER VII

TWILIGHT

THE second time that Nicolette saw the lovely Rixende she looked very different from the shrewish, nervous rider who forgot her manners and created such an unfavourable impression on the country-side a week ago.

Nicolette, urged thereto by Micheline, had at last consented to come over to the château in order to be formally introduced to Bertrand's fiancée.

It was Whit-Sunday, and a glorious afternoon. When Nicolette arrived she found the entire family assembled on the terrace. A table, spread with a beautiful lace cloth, was laden with all kinds of delicacies, such as even Margai over at the mas could not have known how to bake: *gâteaux* and *brioches*, and *babas*, and jars of cream and cups of chocolate. The old Comtesse sat at the head of the table, her white hair dressed high above her head in the stately mode of forty years ago, and embellished with a magnificent jewelled comb.

Her dress was of rich, purple brocade, made after the fashion which prevailed before the Revolution, with hoops and panniers, and round her neck she wore a magnificent rope of pearls. There were rings on her fingers set with gems that sparkled in the sunlight as she raised the silver jug and poured some chocolate out into a delicate porcelain cup.

Nicolette could scarce believe her eyes. There was such an air of splendour about old Madame to-day!

Micheline, too, looked different. She had discarded the plain, drab stuff gown she always wore, and had on a prettily made, dainty muslin frock which made her look younger, less misshapen somehow than usual. Her mother alone appeared out of key in the highly coloured picture. Though she, too, had on a silk gown, it was of the same unrelieved black which she had never discarded since Nicolette could remember anything. But the chair in which she reclined was covered in rich brocade, and her poor, tired head rested upon gorgeously embroidered cushions. The centre of interest in this family group, however, was that delicate figure of loveliness that reclined in an elegant *bergère* in the midst of a veritable cloud of muslin and lace, all adorned with rib-

bons less blue than her eyes. With a quick glance, even as she approached, Nicolette took in every detail of the dainty apparition: from the exquisite head with its wealth of golden curls, modishly dressed with a high tortoiseshell comb, down to the tiny feet in transparent silk stockings and sandal shoes that rested on a cushion of crimson velvet, on the corner of which Bertrand sat, or rather crouched, with arms folded and head raised to gaze unhindered on his beloved.

Micheline was the first to catch sight of her friend.

"Nicolette," she cried, and struggled to her feet, "come quick! We are waiting for you."

She ran to Nicolette as fast as her poor lame leg would allow, and Nicolette, who a moment ago had been assailed with the terrible temptation to play the coward and to run away, away from this strange scene, was compelled to come forward to greet the older ladies by kissing their hands as was customary, and to mix with all these people who, she vaguely felt, were hostile to her. The Comtesse Marcelle had given her a friendly kiss. But she felt like an intruder, a dependent who is tolerated, without being very welcome in the family circle. All her pride rebelled against the feel-

ing, even though she could not combat it. It was Bertrand who made her feel so shy. He had risen very slowly and very deliberately to his feet, and it was with a formal bow and affected manner that he approached Nicolette and took her hand, then formally presented her to his fiancée.

"Mademoiselle Nicolette Deydier," he said, "our neighbour's daughter."

He did not say "my oldest friend" this time. And Mademoiselle de Peyron-Bompar tore herself away from the contemplation of a box of bonbons in order to gaze on Nicolette with languid interest. There was quite a measure of impertinence in the glance which she bestowed on the girl's plain muslin gown, on the priceless fichu of old Mechlin which she wore round her graceful shoulders and on the string of rare pearls around her neck. Nicolette felt tongue-tied and was furious with herself for her awkwardness; she, who was called little chatter-box by her father and by Margai, could find nothing to say but "Yes!" or "No!" or short, prim answers to Rixende's supercilious queries.

"Was the harvesting of orange-blossom finished?"

"Not quite."

"What ennui! The smell of the flowers is enough to give one the migraine. How long would it last?"

"Another week perhaps."

"And does that noisy dance always accompany the harvesting?"

"Always when the boys and girls are merry."

"What ennui! the noise of those abominable tambourines could be heard as far as the château yesterday. One could not get one's afternoon siesta."

"Have a cup of chocolate, Nicolette!" Micheline suggested by way of a diversion as the conversation threatened to drop altogether.

"No, thank you, Micheline!" Nicolette replied, "I had some chocolate before I came."

It was all so awkward, and so very, very unreal. To Nicolette it seemed as if she were in a dream: the old Comtesse's jewelled comb, the brocade chair, the silver on the table, it *could* not be real. The old château of Ventadour was the home of old tradition, not of garish modernity, it lived in a rarefied old-world atmosphere that had rendered it very dear to Nicolette, and all this rich paraphernalia of good living and fine clothes threw a mantle of falsehood almost of vulgarity over the place.

Nicolette found nothing more to say, and Micheline looked hurt and puzzled that her friend did not enter into the spirit of this beautiful unreality. She appeared to be racking her brain for something to say: but no one helped her out. The old Comtesse had not opened her lips since Nicolette had come upon the scene. Bertrand was too busily engaged in devouring his beautiful fiancée with his eyes to pay heed to any one else, and the lovely Rixende was even at this moment smothering a yawn behind her upraised fan.

It was the Comtesse Marcelle, anxious and gentle, who relieved the tension:

“Micheline,” she said, “why don’t you take Nicolette into the boudoir and show her——?” Then she smiled and added with a pathetic little air of gaiety: “you know what?”

This suggestion delighted Micheline.

“Of course,” she cried excitedly. “I was forgetting. Come, Nicolette, and I will show you something that will surprise you.”

She had assumed a mysterious mien and now led the way into the house. Nicolette followed her, ready to fall in with anything that would take her away from here. The two girls went across the terrace together, and the last words which struck Nicolette’s ears before

they went into the house came from Made-moiselle de Peyron-Bompar.

"The wench is quite pretty," she was saying languidly, "in a milkmaid fashion, of course. You never told me, Bertrand, that you had a rustic beauty in these parts. She represents your calf-love, I presume."

Nicolette actually felt hot tears rising to her eyes, but she succeeded in swallowing them, whilst Micheline exclaimed with naïve enthusiasm:

"Isn't Rixende beautiful? How can you wonder, Nicolette, that Bertrand loves her so?"

Fortunately Nicolette was not called upon to make a reply. She had followed Micheline through the tall French window in the drawing-room and in very truth she was entirely dumb with surprise. The room was transformed in a manner which she would not have thought possible. It is true that she had not been inside the château for many months, but even so, it seemed as if a fairy godmother had waved her magic wand and changed the faded curtains into gorgeous brocades, the tattered carpets into delicate Aubussons, the broken-down chairs with protruding stuffing into luxurious fauteuils, covered in elegant tapestries. There were flowers in cut-glass bowls, books

laid negligently on the tables; an open escritoire displayed a silver-mounted inkstand, whilst like a crowning ornament to this beautifully furnished room, a spinet in inlaid rosewood case stood in the corner beside the farthest window, with a pile of music upon it.

Micheline had come to a halt in the centre of the room watching with glee the look of utter surprise and bewilderment on her friend's face, and when Nicolette stood there, dumb, looking about her as she would on a dream picture, Micheline clapped her hands with joy.

"Nicolette," she cried, "do sing something, then you will know that it is all real."

And Nicolette sat down at the spinet and her fingers wandered for awhile idly over the keys. Surely it must all be a dream. A spook had gone by and transformed the dear old château into an ogre's palace: it had cast a spell over poor, trusting Micheline, and set up old Madame as a presiding genius over this new world which was so unlike, so pathetically unlike the old; whilst through this ogre's palace there flitted a naughty, mischief making sprite, with blue eyes and golden curls, a sprite all adorned with lace and ribbons and exquisite to behold, who held dainty, jewelled fingers

right over Bertrand's eyes so that he could no longer see.

Gradually the dream-mood took stronger and yet stronger hold of Nicolette's spirit: and she was hardly conscious of what her fingers were doing. Instinctively they had wandered and wandered over the keys, playing a few bars of one melody and then of another, the player's mind scarcely following them. But now they settled down to the one air that is always the dearest of all to every heart in Provence: "lou Roussignou!"

"Lou Roussignou che volà, volà !"

Nicolette's sweet young voice rose to the accompaniment of the soft-toned spinet. She sang, hardly knowing that she did so, certainly not noticing Micheline's rapt little face of admiration, or that the tall window was open and allowed the rasping voice of Rixende to penetrate so far.

Micheline heard it, and tiptoed as far as the window. Rixende had jumped to her feet. She stood in the middle of the terrace, with all her laces and ribbons billowing around her and her hands held up to her ears:

"Oh! that stupid song!" she cried, "that

monotonous, silly refrain gets on my nerves. Bertrand, take me away where I cannot hear it, or I vow that I shall scream."

Micheline stepped out through the window, from a safe distance she gazed in utter bewilderment at Rixende whom she had hitherto admired so whole-heartedly and who at this moment looked like an angry little vixen. Bertrand, on the other hand, tried to make a joke of the whole thing.

"The sooner you accustom your sweet ears to that song," he said with a laugh, "the sooner will you become a true Queen of Provence."

"But I have no desire to become a Queen of Provence," Rixende retorted dryly, "I hate this dull, dreary country——"

"Rixende!" Bertrand protested, suddenly sobered by an utterance which appeared to him nothing short of blasphemy.

"Eh! what," she retorted tartly, "you do not suppose, my dear Bertrand, that I find this place very entertaining? Or did you really see me with your mind's eye finding delectation in rushing round orange trees in the company of a lot of perspiring louts?"

"No," Bertrand replied gently, "I can only picture you in my mind's eye as the exquisite fairy that you are. But I must confess that I

also see you as the Queen ruling over these lands that are the birthright of our race."

"Very prettily said," Rixende riposted with a sarcastic curl of her red lips, "you were always a master of florid diction, my dear. But let me assure you that I much prefer to queen it over a Paris *salon* than over a half-empty barrack like this old château."

Bertrand threw a rapid, comprehensive glance over the old pile that held all his family pride, all the glorious traditions of his forbears. There was majesty even in its ruins: whole chapters of the history of France had been unfolded within its walls.

"I find the half-empty barrack beautiful," he murmured with a quick, sharp sigh.

"Of course it is beautiful, Bertrand," Rixende rejoined, with that quick transition from petulance to coquetry which seemed one of her chief characteristics. "It is beautiful to me, because it is dear to you."

She clasped her two tiny hands around his arm and turned her gentian-blue eyes up to him. He looked down at the dainty face, rendered still more exquisite by the flush which still lingered on her cheeks. She looked so frail, so fairy-like, such a perfect embodiment of all that was most delicate, most appealing in

womanhood; she was one of those women who have the secret of rousing every instinct of protection and chivalry in a man, and command love and devotion where a more self-reliant, more powerful personality fails even to attract. A look of infinite tenderness came into Bertrand's face as he gazed on the lovely upturned face, and into those blue eyes wherein a few tears were slowly gathering. He felt suddenly brutish and coarse beside this ethereal being, whose finger-tips he was not worthy to touch. He felt that there was nothing which he could do, no act of worship or of self-abnegation, that would in any way repay her marvellous condescension in stepping out of her kingdom amongst the clouds, in order to come down to his level.

And she, quick to notice the varying moods expressed in his face, felt that she had gone yet another step in her entire conquest of him. She gave a little sigh of content, threw him one more ravishing look, then said lightly:

"Let us wander away together, Bertrand, shall we? We seem never to have any time all to ourselves."

Bertrand, wholly subjugated, captured Rixende's little hand, and drawing it under his

arm, led her away in the direction of the wood. Micheline continued to gaze after them, a puzzled frown between her brows. Neither her mother nor her grandmother had joined in the short sparring match between the two lovers, but Micheline, whom infirmity had rendered keenly observant, was quick to note the look of anxiety which her mother cast in the direction where Rixende's dainty gown was just disappearing among the trees.

"That girl will never be happy here——" she murmured as if to herself.

Old Madame who still sat erect and stiff at the head of the table broke in sharply:

"Once she is married to Bertrand," she said, "Rixende will have to realise that she represents a great name, and that her little bourgeois ideas of pleasure and pomp are sadly out of key in this place where her husband's ancestors have been the equal of kings."

The Comtesse Marcelle sighed drearily.

"Yes, when she is married—but——"

"But what," grandmama queried sharply.

"I sometimes wonder if that marriage will make for Bertrand's happiness."

"Bertrand's happiness," the old Comtesse echoed with a harsh laugh, "Hark at the sentimental schoolgirl! My dear Marcelle! to

hear you talk, one would think you had not lived through twenty-five years of grinding poverty. In Heaven's name have you not yet realised that the only possible happiness for Bertrand lies in a brilliant marriage. We have plunged too deeply into the stream now, we cannot turn back, we must swim with the tide—or sink—there is no middle-way."

"I know, I know," the younger woman replied meekly. "Debts, more debts! more debts! O, my God!" she moaned and buried her face in her hands; "as if they had not wrought enough mischief already. More debts, and if——"

"And now you talk like a fool," the old Comtesse broke in tartly. "Would you have had the girl come here and find that all your carpets were in rags, your cushions moth-eaten, the family silver turned to lead or brass? Would you have had her find the Comtesse de Ventadour in a patched and darned gown, waited on by a lad from the village in sabots and an unwashed shirt that reeked of manure? Yes," she went on in that firm, decisive tone against which no one at the château had ever dared to make a stand, "yes, I did advise Bertrand to borrow a little more money, in order that his family should not be shamed before his

fiancée. But you may rest assured, my good Marcelle, that the usurers who lent him the money would not have done it were they not satisfied that he would in the very near future be able to meet all his liabilities. You live shut away from all the civilised world, but every one in Paris knows that M. le Comte de Ventadour is co-heir with his fiancée, Mlle. de Peyron-Bompar, to the Mont-Pahon millions. Bertrand had no difficulty in raising the money, he will have none in repaying it, and Jaume Deydier is already regretting, I make no doubt, the avarice which prompted him to refuse to help his seigneurs in their short-lived difficulty."

The Comtesse Marcelle uttered a cry, almost of horror.

"Deydier!" she exclaimed, "surely, Madame, you did not ask him to——?"

"I asked him to lend me five thousand louis, until the marriage contract between Bertrand and Mlle. Peyron-Bompar was signed. I confess that I did him too much honour, for he refused. Bah! those louts!" grandmama added with lofty scorn, "they have no idea of honour."

The Comtesse Marcelle said nothing more, only a deep flush rose to her wan cheeks, and to hide it from the scathing eyes of her mother-

in-law she buried her face in her hands. Micheline's heart was torn between the desire to run and comfort her mother and her fear of grandmama's wrath if she did so. Instinctively she looked behind her, and then gave a gasp. Nicolette was standing in the window embrasure, her hands clasped in front of her; Micheline could not conjecture how much she had heard of the conversation that had been carried on on the terrace this past quarter of an hour. The girl's face wore a strange expression of detachment as if her spirit were not here at all; her eyes seemed to be gazing inwardly, into her own soul.

"Nicolette," Micheline exclaimed.

Nicolette started, as if in truth she were waking from a dream.

"I was just thinking," she said quietly, "that it is getting late; I must be going. Margai will be anxious."

She stepped over the window sill on to the terrace, and threw her arms round Micheline who was obviously struggling with insistent tears. Then she went over to the table, where the two ladies were sitting. She dropped the respectful curtsy which usage demanded from young people when taking leave of their elders. The Comtesse Marcelle extended a friendly

hand to her, which Nicolette kissed affectionately, but old Madame only nodded her head with stately aloofness: and Nicolette was thankful to escape from this atmosphere of artificiality and hostility which gave her such a cruel ache in her heart.

Micheline offered to accompany her part of the way home, but in reality the girl longed to be alone, and she knew that Micheline would understand.

Nicolette wandered slowly down the dusty road. She had purposely avoided the pretty descent down the terraced gradients through the woods; somehow she felt as if they too must be changed, as if the malignant fairy had also waved a cruel wand over the shady olive trees, and the carob to which captive maidens, long since passed away, were wont to be tethered whilst gallant knights slew impossible dragons and tinged the grass with the monster's blood. Surely, surely, all that had changed too! Perhaps it had never been. Perhaps childhood had been a dream and the carob tree was as much a legend as the dragons and the fiery chargers of old. Nicolette had a big heart-ache, because she was young and because life had revealed itself to her whilst she

was still a child, showed her all the beauty, the joy, the happiness that it could bestow if it would; it had drawn aside the curtain which separated earth from heaven, and then closed them again leaving her on the wrong side, all alone, shivering, pining, longing, not understanding why God could be so cruel when the sky was so blue, His world so fair, and she, Nicolette, possessed of an infinite capacity for love.

Whilst she had sat at the spinet and sung "lou Roussignou" she had gazed abstractedly through the open window before her, and seen that exquisite being, all lace and ribbons and loveliness, wielding little poison-darts that she flung at Bertrand, hurting him horribly in his pride, in his love of the old home: and Nicolette, whose pretty head held a fair amount of shrewd common sense, marvelled what degree of happiness the future held for those two, who were so obviously unsuited to one another. Rixende de Peyron-Bompar, petulant, spoilt, pleasure-loving, and Tan-tan the slayer of dragons, the intrepid Paul of the Paul et Virginie days on the desert island. Rixende, the butterfly Queen of a Paris *salon*, and Bertrand, Comte de Ventadour, the descendant of troubadours, the idealist, the

dreamer, the weak vessel filled to the brim with all that was most lovable, most reprehensible, most sensitive, most certainly doomed to suffer.

If only she thought that he would be happy, Nicolette felt that she could go about with a lighter heart. She had a happy home: a father who idolised her: she loved this land where she was born, the old mas, the climbing rose, the vine arbour, the dark cypresses that stood sentinel beside the outbuildings of the mas. In time, perhaps, loving these things, she would forget that other, that greater love, that immeasurably greater love that now threatened to break her heart.

How beautiful the world was! and how beautiful was Provence! the trees, the woods, Luberon and its frowning crags, the orange trees that sent their intoxicating odour through the air. Already the sun had hidden his splendour behind Luberon, and had lit that big crimson fire behind the mountain tops that had seemed the end of the world to Nicolette in the days of old. The silence of evening had fallen on these woods where bird-song was always scarce. Nicolette walked very slowly: she felt tired to-night, and she never liked a road when terraced gradients through rows of olive trees

were so much more inviting. The road was a very much longer way to the mas than the woods. Nicolette paused, debating what she should do. The crimson fire behind Luberon had paled to rose and then to lemon-gold, and to right and left the sky was of a pale turquoise tint, with tiny clouds lingering above the stony peaks of Luberon, tiny, fluffy grey clouds edged with madder that slowly paled.

The short twilight spread its grey mantle over the valley and the mountain-side; the tiny clouds were now of a uniform grey: grey were the crags and the boulders, the tree-tops and the roof of the distant mas. Only the dark cypresses stood out like long, inky blotches against that translucent grey. And from the valley there rose that intoxicating fragrance of the blossom-laden orange trees. Way down on the road below a cart rattled by, the harness jingling, the axles groaning, the driver, with a maiden beside him, singing a song of Provence. For a few minutes these sounds filled the air with their insistence on life, movement, toil, their testimony to the wheels of destiny that never cease to grind. Then all was still again, and the short twilight faded into evening.

And as Nicolette deliberately turned from the road into the wood, a nightingale began to

sing. The soft little trills went rolling and echoing through the woods like a call from heaven itself to partake of the joy, the beauty, the fulness of the earth and all its loveliness. And suddenly, as Nicolette worked her way down the terraced gradients, she spied, standing upon a grass-covered knoll, two forms interlaced: Bertrand had his arms around Rixende, his face was buried in the wealth of her golden curls, and she lay quite passive, upon his breast.

Nicolette dared not move, for fear she should be seen, for fear, too, that she should break upon this, surely the happiest hour in Tan-tan's life. They paid no heed of what went on around them: Bertrand held his beloved in his arms with an embrace that was both passionate and yearning, whilst overhead the nightingale trilled its sweet, sad melody. Nicolette stood quite still, dry-eyed and numb. Awhile ago she had been sure that if only she could think that Tan-tan was happy, she could go through life with a lighter heart. Well! she had her wish! there was happiness, absolute, radiant happiness expressed in that embrace. Tan-tan was happy, and his loved one lay passive in his arms, whilst the song of the nightingale spoke unto his soul promises of

greater happiness still. And Nicolette closed her eyes, because the picture before her seemed to sear her very heart-strings and wrench them out of her breast. She stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth, because a desperate cry of pain had risen to her throat. Then, turning suddenly, she ran and ran down the slope, away, away as far away as she could from that haunting picture of Tan-tan and his happiness.

CHAPTER VIII

CHRISTMAS EVE

IT was a very rare thing indeed for discord to hold sway at the mas. Perfect harmony reigned habitually between Jaume Deydier, his daughter and the old servant who had loved and cared for her ever since Nicolette had been a tiny baby, laid in Margai's loving arms by the hands of the dying mother.

Jaume Deydier was, of course, master in his own house. In Provence, old traditions still prevail, and the principles of independence and equality bred by the Revolution had never penetrated into these mountain fastnesses, where primitive and patriarchal modes of life gave all the happiness and content that the women of the old country desired. That Nicolette had been indulged and petted both by her father and her old nurse, was only natural. The child was pretty, loving, lovable and motherless; the latter being the greater claim on her father's indulgence. As for Margai, she was Nicolette's slave, even though she

grumbled and scolded and imagined that she ruled the household and ordered the servants about at the mas, in exactly the same manner as old Madame ordered hers over at the château.

From which it may be gathered that on the whole it was Nicolette who usually had her way in the house. But for the last two days she had been going about with a listless, dispirited air, whilst Jaume Deydier did nothing but frown, and Margai's mutterings were as incessant as they were for the most part unintelligible.

"I cannot understand you, Mossou Deydier," she said more than once to her master, "one would think you wanted to be rid of the child."

"Don't be a fool, Margai," was Deydier's tart response. But Margai was not to be silenced quite so readily. She had been fifty years in the service of the Deydiers, and had—as she oft and picturesquely put it—turned down Mossou Jaume's breeches many a time when he sneaked into her larder and stole the jam she had just boiled, or the honey she had recently gathered from the hives. Oh, no! she was not going to be silenced—not like that.

"If the child loved him," she went on argu-

ing, "I would not say another word. But she has told you once and for all that she does not care for young Barnadou, and does not wish to marry."

"Oh!" Jaume Deydier rejoined with a shrug of his wide shoulders, "girls always say that at first. She is not in love with any one else, I suppose!"

"God forbid!" Margai exclaimed, so hastily that the wooden spoon wherewith she had been stirring the soup a moment ago fell out of her hand with a clatter.

"There, now!" she said tartly, "you quite upset me with your silly talk. Nicolette in love? With whom, I should like to know?"

"Well then," Deydier retorted.

"Well then what?"

"Why should she refuse Ameyric? He loves her. He would suit me perfectly as a son-in-law. What has the child got against him?"

"But can't you wait, Mossou Jaume?" Margai would argue. "Can't you wait? Why, the child is not yet nineteen."

"My wife was seventeen when I married her," Deydier retorted. "And I would like to see Nicolette tokened before the fêtes. I was affianced to my wife two days before Noël, we

had the *gros soupé* at her parents' house on Christmas Eve, and walked together to midnight Mass."

"And two years later she was in her coffin," Margai muttered.

"What has that to do with it? Thou'rt a fool, Margai." Whereupon Margai, feeling that in truth her last remark had been neither logical nor kind, reverted to her original argument: "One would think you wanted to be rid of the child, Mossou Jaume."

And the whole matter would be gone through all over again from the beginning, and Jaume Deydier would lose his temper and say harsh things which he regretted as soon as they had crossed his lips, and Margai would continue to argue and to exasperate him, until, luckily, Nicolette would come into the room and perch on her father's knee, and smother further arguments by ruffling up his hair, or putting his necktie straight, or merely throwing her arms around his neck.

This all occurred two days before Christmas. There had been a fall of snow way up in the mountains, and Luberon wore a white cap upon his crest. The mistral had come once or twice tearing down the valley, and in the living-

rooms at the mas huge fires of olive and eucalyptus burned in the hearths. Margai had been very busy preparing the food for the *gros soupé*, the traditional banquet of Christmas Eve in old Provence, and which Jaume Deydier offered every year to forty of his chief employés. Nicolette now was also versed in the baking and roasting of the *calènos*, the fruits and cakes which would be distributed to all the men employed at the farm and to their families: and even Margai was forced to admit that the *Poumpo taillado*—the national cake, baked with sugar and oil—was never so good as when Nicolette mixed it herself.

Of Ameyric Barnadou there was less and less talk as the festival drew nigh. Margai and Nicolette were too busy to argue, and Jaume Deydier sat by his fireside in somewhat surly silence. He could not understand his own daughter. *Ah ça!* what did the child want? What had she to say against young Barnadou? Every girl had to marry some time, then why not Nicolette?

But he said nothing more for a day or two. His pet scheme that the *fiançailles* should be celebrated on Christmas Eve had been knocked on the head by Nicolette's obstinacy, but

Jaume hoped a great deal from the banquet, the *calignaou*, and above all, from the midnight Mass. Nicolette was very gentle and very sentimental, and Ameyric so very passionately in love. The boy would be a fool if he could not make the festivals, the procession, the flowers, the candles, the incense to be his helpmates in his wooing.

On Christmas Eve Jaume Deydier's guests were assembled in the hall where the banquet was also laid: the more important overseers and workpeople of his olive oil and orange-flower water factories were there, some with their wives and children.

Jaume Deydier, in the beautiful bottle-green cloth coat which he had worn at his wedding, and which he wore once every year for the Christmas festival, his grey hair and his whiskers carefully brushed, his best paste buckles on his shoes, shook every one cordially by the hand; beside him Nicolette, in silk kirtle and lace fichu, smiled and chatted, proud to be the châtelaine of this beautiful home, the queen of this little kingdom amongst the mountains, the beneficent fairy to whom the whole country-side looked if help or comfort or material assistance was required. Around her pressed the men and the women and the children who

had come to the feast. There was old Tiberge, the doyen of the staff over at Pertuis, whose age had ceased to be recorded, it had become fabulous: there was Thibaut, the chief overseer, with his young wife who had her youngest born by the hand. There was Zacharie, the chief clerk, who was tokened to Violante, the daughter of Laugier the cashier. They were all a big family together: had seen one another grow up, marry, have children, and their children had known one another from their cradles. Jaume Deydier amongst them was like the head of the family, and no seigneur over at the château had ever been so conscious of his own dignity. As for Nicolette, she was just the little fairy whom they had seen growing from a lovely child into an exquisite woman, their Nicolette, of whom every girl was proud, and with whom every lad was in love.

The noise in the hall soon became deafening. They are neither a cold nor a reserved race, these warm-hearted children of sunny Provence. They carry their hearts on their sleeves: they talk at the top of their voices, and when they laugh they shake the old rafters of their mountain homes with the noise. And Christmas Eve was the day of all days. They all loved the gifts of the *calènos*, the dried fruits

and cakes which the *patron* distributed with a lavish hand, and which they took home to their bairns or to those less fortunate members of their families who were not partakers of Deydier's hospitality. But they adored the *Poumpo taillado*, the sweet, oily cake that no one baked better than demoiselle Nicolette. And the banquet would begin with *bouillabaisse* which was concocted by Margai from an old recipe that came direct from Marseilles, and there would be turkeys and geese from Deydier's splendid farmyard, and salads and artichokes served with marrow fat. Already the men were smacking their lips; manners not being over-refined in Provence, where Nature alone dictates how a man shall behave, without reference to what his neighbours might think. There was a cheery fire, too, in the monumental hearth, and the shutters behind the windows being hermetically closed, the atmosphere presently became steaming and heady with the smell of good food and the aroma from the huge, long-necked bottles of good Roussillon wine.

But every one there knew that, before they could sit down to table, the solemn rite of the *Calignaou* must be gone through. As soon as the huge clock that stood upon the mantelshelf

had finished striking six, old Tiberge, whose first birthday was lost in the nebulae of time, stepped out from the little group that encircled him, and took tiny Savinien, the four-year-old son of the chief overseer, by the hand: December leading January, Winter coupled with Spring; Jaume Deydier put a full bumper of red wine in the little fellow's podgy hand: and together these two, the aged and the youngster, toddled with uncertain steps out of the room, followed by the entire party. They made their way to the entrance door of the house, on the threshold of which a huge log of olive wood had in the meanwhile been placed. Guided by his mother, little Savinien now poured some of the wine over the log, whilst, prompted by Nicolette, his baby lips lisped the traditional words:

“ Alègre, Diou nous alègre
Cachofué ven, tout ben ven
Diou nous fagué la graci de voir l'an qué ven
Se sian pas mai, siguen pas men.” *

After which the bumper of wine was handed round and every one drank. Still guided by his mother, the child then took hold of one end

* Let us be merry! God make us merry! Hidden fires come, all good things come! May God give us grace to see the coming year. If there be not more of us, let there not be fewer.

of the Provençal Yule log, and the old man of the other, and together they marched back to the dining-hall and solemnly deposited the log in the hearth, where it promptly began to blaze.

Thus by this quaint old custom did they celebrate the near advent of the coming year. The old man and the child, each a symbol—Tiberge of the past, little Savinien of the future, the fire of the Yule log the warmth of the sun. Every one clapped their hands, the noise became deafening, and Jaume Deydier's stentorian voice, crying: "*A table, les amis!*" could scarce be heard above the din. After that they all sat at the table and the business of the banquet began.

Nicolette alone was silent, smiling, outwardly as merry as any of them; she sat at the head of her father's table, and went about her duties as mistress of the house with that strange sense of unreality that had haunted her this past year still weighing on her heart.

In the years of her childhood—the years that were gone—Tan-tan and Micheline were always allowed to come and spend Christmas Eve at the mas. Even grandmama, dour, haughty grandmama, realised the necessity of allowing children to be gay and happy on

what is essentially the children's festival. So Tan-tan and Micheline used to come, and for several years it was Tan-tan who used to pour the wine over the log, and he was so proud because he knew the prescribed ditty by heart, and never had to be prompted. He spoke them with such an air, that she, Nicolette, who was little more than a baby then, would gaze on him wide-eyed with admiration. And one year there had been a great commotion, because old Métastase, who was said to be one hundred years old, and whose hands trembled like the leaves of the old aspen tree down by the Lèze, had dropped the log right in the middle of the floor, and the women had screamed, and even the men were scared, as it was supposed to be an evil omen: but Tan-tan was not afraid. He just stood there, and as calm as a young god commanded Métastase to pick up the log again, and when it was at last safely deposited upon the hearth, he had glanced round at the assembled company and remarked coolly: "It is not more difficult than that!" whereupon every one had laughed, and the incident was forgotten.

Then another time——

But what was the good of thinking about all that? They were gone, those dear, good

times. Tan-tan was no more. He was M. le Comte de Ventadour, affianced to a beautiful girl whom he loved so passionately, that at even when he held her in his arms, the nightingale came out of his retreat amidst the branches of mimosa trees and sang a love song as an accompaniment to the murmur of her kisses.

Soon after eleven o'clock the whole party set out to walk to Manosque for the midnight Mass at the little church there. Laughing, joking, singing, the merry troup wound its way along the road that leads up to the village perched upon the mountain-side, girls and boys with their arms around each other, older men and women soberly bringing up the rear. Overhead the canopy of the sky of a luminous indigo was studded with stars, and way away in the east the waning moon, cool and mysterious, shed its honey-coloured lustre over mountain peaks and valley, picked out the winding road with its fairy-light, till it gleamed lemon-golden like a ribbon against the leafy slopes, and threw fantastic shadows in the way of the lively throng. Some of them sang as they went along, for your Provençal has the temperament of the South in its highest degree,

and when he is happy he bursts into song. And to-night the pale moon was golden, the blue of the sky like a sheet of sapphire and myriads of stars proclaimed the reign of beauty and of poesy: the night air was mild, with just a touch in it of snow-cooled breeze that came from over snow-capped Luberon: it was heavy with the fragrance of pines and eucalyptus and rosemary which goes to the head like wine. So men and maids, as they walked, held one another close, and their lips met in the pauses of their song.

But Nicollette walked with her girl-friends, those who were not yet tokened. She was as merry as any of them, she chatted and she laughed, but she did not join in the song. To-night of all nights was one of remembrance of past festivals when she was a baby and her father carried her to midnight Mass, with Tan-tan trotting manfully by his side: sometimes it would be very cold, the mistral would be blowing across the valley and Margai would wind a thick red scarf around her head and throat. And once, only once—it snowed, and Tan-tan would stop at the road side and gather up the snow and throw it at the passers-by.

Memory was insistent. Nicolette would have liked to smother it in thoughts of the pres-

ent, in vague hopes of the future, but every turn of the road, every tree, and every boulder, even the shadows that lengthened and diminished at her feet as she walked, were arrayed against forgetfulness.

The little church at Manosque (crude in architecture, tawdry in decoration, ugly if measured by the canons of art and good taste, is never really unlovely. On days of great festivals it was even beautiful, filled as it was to overflowing with picturesque people, whose loving hands had helped to adorn the sacred edifice with all that nature yielded for the purpose: branches of grey-leaved eucalyptus and tender twigs of lavender, great leafy masses of stiff carob and feathery mimosa and delicate branches of red or saffron flowered grevillea, all tied with gaudy ribbons around the white-washed pillars or nestling in huge, untidy bouquets around the painted effigy of the Virgin. In one corner of the little church, the traditional crèche had been erected: the manger against a background of leaves and stones, with the figures of Mary, and the Sacred Infant, of St. Joseph and the Kings. All very naïve and very crude, but tender and lovable, and

romantic as are the people of this land of sunshine and poesy.

For midnight Mass, the little building was certainly too small to hold all the worshippers, so they overflowed into the porch, the organ-loft and the vestry; and those who found no place inside, remained standing in the road listening to the singing and the bells. The women in their gaudy shawls, orange, green, blue, magenta, looked like a parterre of riotous coloured flowers in the body of the church, while the men in their best clothes were squeezed against the walls or jammed into the corners, taking up as little of the room as they could.

Nicolette knelt beside her father. On entering the church she had seen Ameyric, who obviously had been in wait for her and offered her the Holy water as she entered. His eyes had devoured her, and despite his sense of reverence and the solemnity of the occasion, his hand had closed over her fingers when she took the Holy water from him. When Father Fournier began saying Mass, Nicolette bowed her head between her hands and prayed with all her heart and soul that Ameyric might find another girl who would be worthy of him and return his love. She prayed too, and prayed

earnestly that Bertrand might continue to be happy with his beloved and that he should never know a moment's disappointment or repining. Nicolette had been taught by Father Fournier that it was part of a Christian girl's duty to love every one, even her enemies, and to pray for them earnestly, for *le Bon Dieu* would surely know if prayers were not sincere. So Nicolette forced herself to think kindly of Rixende, to remember her only as she had last seen her that evening in May, when she lay quite placid in Bertrand's arms, with her head upon his breast and with the nightingale trilling away for dear life over her head.

So persistently did Nicolette think of this picture that she succeeded in persuading herself that the thought made her happy, and then she realised that her face was wet with tears.

Father Fournier preached a sermon all about humility and obedience and the example set by the Divine Master, and Nicolette wondered if it was not perhaps her duty to do as her father wished and to marry Ameyric Barnadou? Oh! it was difficult, very difficult, and Nicolette thought how much more simple it would be if *le Bon Dieu* was in the habit of telling people exactly what He wished them to do. The feeling of unreality once more

came over her. She sat with eyes closed while Father Fournier went on talking, talking, and the air grew hotter, more heavy every moment with the fumes of the incense, the burning candles, the agitated breath of hundreds of entranced village folk. The noise, the smell, the rising clouds of incense all became blurred to her eyes, her ears, her nostrils: only the past remained quite real, as she had lived it before the awful, awful day when Tan-tan went out of her life, the past with its dragons, and distressful maidens, and woods redolent with rosemary and groves of citron-blossoms, the past as she had lived it with Tan-tan and Micheline, those happy Christmases of old.

Tan-tan, who was a wilful, fidgety boy, was always good when he came to midnight Mass. Nicolette with eyes closed and Father Fournier's voice droning in her ears, could see him now sitting quite, quite still with Micheline on one side of him, and her, Nicolette, on the other. And they, the three children, sat agape while the offertory procession wound its way through the crowded church. She felt that she was a baby again, and that her tiny feet could not touch the ground, and her wee hands kept reaching out to touch Tan-tan's sleeve or his knee. Ah, that beautiful, that exciting

procession! The children craned their little necks to see above the heads of the crowd, and Jaume Deydier would take his little girl in his arms and set her to stand upon his knee, so that she might see everything; Micheline would stand up with Margai's arm around her to keep her steady, but Tan-tan's pride would have a long struggle with his curiosity. He would remain seated just like a grown man and pretend that he could see quite well; and this pretence he would keep up for a long while, although Nicolette would exclaim from time to time in that loud hoarse whisper peculiar to children:

"Tan-tan, stand on your chair! It is lovely!"

Then at last Tan-tan would give in and stand up on his chair, after which Nicolette felt that she could set to and enjoy the procession too. First the band of musicians with beribboned tambours, bagpipes and clarinets: then a group of young men, goatherds from Luberon or Vaucluse, carrying huge baskets of fruits and live pigeons: after which a miniature cart entirely covered with leafy branches of olive and cypress with lighted candles set all along its sides, and drawn by a lamb, whose snow-white fleece was adorned with tiny bunches of col-

oured ribbons; behind this cart a group of girls wearing the *Garbalin*, a tall conical head-dress adorned with tiny russet apples and miniature oranges: finally a band of singers, singing the Christmas hymns.

The children would get so excited at sight of the lamb and the little cart, that their elders had much ado to keep them from clapping their hands or shouting with glee, which would have been most unseemly in the sacred building.

Then, when the procession was over, they would scramble back into their seats and endure the rest of the Mass as best they could. Nicolette saw it all through the smoke of incense, the flaring candles and the thick, heady air. That was reality! not the dreary present with Tan-tan gone out of Nicolette's life, and a beautiful stranger with golden hair and gentian-blue eyes shouting petulantly at him or feigning love which she was too selfish to feel. That surely could not be reality: the Bon Dieu was too good to treat Tan-tan so.

And as if to make the past more real still, the sound of fife and bagpipe and tambour struck suddenly upon Nicolette's ear. She looked up and there was the procession just starting to go round the church, the baskets with the live pigeons, the little cart, the white

lamb with its fleece all tied up with ribbons: the same procession which Nicolette had watched from the point of vantage of her father's knee sixteen years ago, and had watched every year since—at first by Tantan's side, then with him gone, and the whole world a dreary blank to her.

Was this then what life really meant? The same things over and over again, year after year, till one grew old, till one grew not to care? Did life mean loneliness and watching the happiness of others, while one's own heart was so full that it nearly broke? Then, if that was the case, why not do as father wished and marry Ameyric?

CHAPTER IX

THE TURNING POINT

THE first inkling that Nicolette had of the happenings at the château was on Christmas Day itself after High Mass. When she came out of church with her father some of the people had already got hold of the news: those who had arrived late had heard of it as they came along, and with that agitation which comes into even, monotonous lives whenever the unexpected occurs, groups of village folk stood about outside the church, and instead of the usual chaff and banter, every one talked only of the one thing: the events at the château.

"What? You have not heard?"

"No, what is it?"

"A death in the family."

"Holy Virgin, who?"

"The old Comtesse? She is very old!"

"The Comtesse Marcelle? She is always sick!"

"No one knows."

Nicolette, vaguely frightened, questioned those who seemed to know best. *Mais, voilà!* no one knew anything definite, although one or two averred that they had seen a man on horseback go up to the château, soon after dawn. This detail did not calm Nicolette's fears. On the contrary. If the sad news had come from a distance . . . from Paris, for example . . . Oh! it was unthinkable! But already she had made up her mind. After mid-day dinner she would go and see Micheline. It was but a short walk to the château, and surely father could spare her for an hour or two.

Jaume Deydier was obdurate at first. What had Nicolette to do with the château? Their affairs were no concern of hers. He himself never set foot inside that old owl's nest, and he had hoped that by now Nicolette had had enough of those proud, ungrateful folk. If they had trouble at the mas, would some one from the château come over to see what was amiss? But Nicolette held on to her idea. If Micheline was in trouble she would have no one to comfort her. Even father could not object to her friendship with Micheline, dear, misshapen, gentle Micheline!—and then there was the Comtesse Marcelle! If the old Com-

tesse spoke to either of them at all, it would only be to say unkind things! Oh! it was terrible to think of those three women at the château, faced with trouble, and with no one to speak to but one another. And until recently—the last two years, in fact—Nicolette had always gone over to the château on Christmas afternoon to offer Christmas greetings and *calènos* from the mas, in the shape of oranges, lemons, tangerines, and a beautiful *Poumpo taillado*, baked by herself. And now when Micheline was perhaps in trouble, and she, Nicolette, pining to know what the trouble was oh! father could not be so cruel as to stop her going.

No doubt Deydier would have remained obdurate, but just at that moment he happened to catch sight of Ameyric. The lad was standing close by, an eager expression on his face, and—if such an importation could be laid at the door of so sober a man as Jaume Deydier—one might almost say that an imp of mischief seized hold of him and whispered advice which he was prompt to take.

“Well, boy!” he called over to Ameyric; “what do you say? Will you call for Nicolette after dinner, and walk with her to the château?”

"Aye! and escort her back," Ameyric replied eagerly, "if Mademoiselle Deydier will allow."

After which the father gave the required permission, mightily satisfied with his own diplomacy. He had always believed in Christmas festivals for bringing lads and maidens together, and he himself had been tokened on Christmas Eve.

Ameyric shook him warmly by the hand: "Thank you, Mossou Deydier," he murmured.

"Well, boy," Deydier retorted in a whisper, "it should be to-day with you, or I fear me it will be never."

Whenever she thought over the sequence of events which had their beginning on that Christmas morning, Nicolette always looked upon that climb up to the château as a blank. She could not even have told you if it was cold or warm. She wore her beautiful orange-coloured shawl with the embroidery and deep fringe, and she had on shoes that were thoroughly comfortable for the long tramp up the road. She knew that Ameyric helped her to carry the baskets that contained the fruits and cakes; she also knew that at times he talked a great deal, and that at others there were long silences between them. She knew that she was

very, very sorry for Ameyric, because love that is not reciprocated is the most cruel pain that can befall any man. She also tried to remember what Father Fournier had said in his sermon at midnight Mass, and her own firm resolution not to hate her enemies, and to submit her selfish will to the wishes of her father.

Now and again friends overtook them and walked with them a little way, or others coming from Pertuis met them and exchanged greetings.

The roads between the villages round about here are always busy at Christmas time with people coming and going to and fro, from church, or one another's houses, and Ameyric, who grumbled when a chattering crowd came to disturb his *tête-à-tête* with Nicolette, had to own that, but for the roads being so busy, he would not perhaps have been allowed to walk at this hour with Nicolette.

And people who saw them that afternoon spread the news abroad.

"Ameyric Barnadou," they said, "will be tokened before the New Year to Nicolette Deydier."

Father Siméon-Luce was just leaving the château when Nicolette arrived there with Ameyric. Jasmin was at the door, and the

old priest said something to him, and then put on his hat. Ameyric was waiting in the courtyard, and Nicolette, with a basket on each arm, had gone up to the main entrance door alone. She curtsied to the priest, who nodded to her in an absent-minded manner.

"Very sad, very sad," he murmured abstractedly, "but only to be expected." Then he seemed to become aware of Nicolette's identity, and added kindly:

"You have come to see Mademoiselle Micheline, my child? Ah! a very sad Christmas for them all."

But somehow Nicolette felt that these were conventional words, and that if there had been real sorrow at the château, Father Siméon-Luce would have looked more sympathetic. Somewhat reassured already, Nicolette waited till the old priest had gone across the courtyard, then she slipped in through the great door and spoke to Jasmin:

"Who is it, Jasmin?" she asked excitedly.

"Madame de Mont-Pahon," the old man replied, and Nicolette was conscious of an immense feeling of relief. She had not realised herself until this moment how desperately anxious she had been.

"She died, it seems, the night before last, in

Paris," Jasmin went on glibly, "but how the news came here early this morning, I do not pretend to know, Mam'zelle Nicolette," he added in an awed whisper, "it must be through the devil's agency."

Jasmin had never even tried to fathom the mysteries of the new aerial telegraph which of late had been extended as far as Avignon, and which brought news from Paris quicker than a man could ride from Pertuis. The devil, in truth, had something to do with that, and Jasmin very much hoped that Father Siméon-Luce had taken the opportunity of exorcising those powers of darkness whilst he ate his Christmas dinner with the family.

"Can I see Mademoiselle Micheline?" Nicolette broke in impatiently on the old man's mutterings.

"Yes, yes, mam'zelle! Mademoiselle Micheline must be somewhere about the house. But mam'zelle must excuse me—we—we—are busy in the kitchen——"

"Yes, yes, go, Jasmin! I'll find my way."

It was now late in the afternoon, and twilight was drawing rapidly in; while Jasmin shuffled off in one direction Nicolette made her way through the vestibule. It was very dark, for candles were terribly dear these days, but

Nicolette knew every flagstone, every piece of furniture in the familiar old place, and she made her way cautiously toward the great hall, where hung the portraits. A buzz of conversation came from there. Then and only then did Nicolette realise what a foolish thing she had done. How would she dare thrust herself in the midst of the family circle at a moment like this? She had taken to living of late so much in the past that she had not realised how unwelcome she was at the château: but now she remembered: she remembered the last time she had been here, and how the old Comtesse had not even spoken to her, whilst Bertrand's fiancée had made cutting remarks about her. She looked down ruefully on her baskets, feeling that her cakes would no more be appreciated than herself. A furious desire seized her to turn back and to run away: but she would leave the *calénos* with Jasmin, for she would be ashamed to own to her father what a coward she had been. Already she had made a movement to go, when a name spoken over there in the portrait gallery fell on her ear.

"Bertrand."

Instinctively Nicolette paused: there was magic in the name: she could not go whilst its echo lingered in the old hall.

"It need make no difference to Bertrand's plans," the old Comtesse was saying in that hard, decisive tone which seemed to dispose of the destinies of her whole family.

Hers was the only voice that penetrated as far as the vestibule where Nicolette had remained standing; the soft, wearied tones of the Comtesse Marcelle, and the uncertain ones of Micheline did not reach the listener's ears.

"No. Perhaps not for the New Year," the old Comtesse said presently in response to a remark from one of the others; "but soon, you may be sure. The will will be read directly after the funeral, and there is no reason why Bertrand should not be here a week later."

Again there was a pause, during which all that Nicolette heard was a weary sigh. Then Madame's harsh voice was raised again.

"You are a fool, my good Marcelle! What should go wrong, I should like to know? . . ."

Then once more a pause and presently a loud, hard laugh.

"Pardi! but I should not have credited you with such a talent for raising bogeys, my dear. Have I not told you, over and over again, that I had Sybille de Mont-Pahon's definite promise that the two young people shall be co-heirs of her fortune? Instead of lamenting there,

you should rejoice. Sybille has died most opportunely, for now Bertrand can pay his debts even before his marriage, and the young couple can make a start without a cloud upon the horizon of their lives!"

At this point Nicolette felt that she had no right to listen further. She deposited her two baskets upon the table in the vestibule, and tiptoed back to the door. Even as she did so she heard old Madame's unpleasant voice raised once more.

"You should thank me on your knees," she said tartly, "for all I have done. Debts, you call them? and dare to upbraid me for having contracted them? Let me tell you this: Rix-ende de Peyron-Bompar would never have tolerated this old barrack at all, had she seen it as it was. The stuffs which I bought, the carpets, the liveries for those loutish servants were so much capital invested to secure the Mont-Pahon millions. What did they amount to? Five thousand louis at most! and we have secured five millions and Bertrand's happiness."

And Nicolette, as she finally ran out of the house, heard a murmur, like a sigh of longing: "God grant it!"

But she was not quite sure whether the sound came from the old picture hall, or was just the

echo of the wish that had risen from her heart.

Outside she met Ameyric, and he escorted her home. He spoke again of his love, and she was no longer impatient to hear him talk. She was intensely sorry for him. If he had the same pain in his heart that she had, then he was immensely to be pitied: and if it lay in her power to make one man happy, then surely it was her duty to do so.

But she would make no definite promise.

"Let us wait until the spring," she said, in answer to an earnest appeal from him for a quick decision.

"Orange-blossom time?" he asked.

"Perhaps," she replied.

And with this half-promise he had perforce to be satisfied.

CHAPTER X

WOMAN TO WOMAN

IT was fourteen days after the New Year. Snow had fallen, and the mistral had blown for forty-eight hours unmercifully down the valley. News from Paris had been scanty, but such as they were, they were reassuring. A courier had come over all the way from Paris on New Year's eve, with a letter from Bertrand, giving a few details of the proposed arrangements for Madame de Mont-Pahon's funeral, which was to take place on the feast of the Holy Innocents. The letter had been written on the day following her death, which had come as a great shock to everybody, even though she had been constantly ailing of late. Directly after the funeral, he, Bertrand, would set off for home in the company of M. de Peyron-Bompar, Rixende's father, who desired to talk over the new arrangements that would have to be made for his daughter's marriage. The wedding would of course have to be postponed for a few months, but there was no rea-

son why it should not take place before the end of the summer, and as Rixende no longer had a home now in Paris, the ceremonies could well taken place in Bertrand's old home.

This last suggestion sent old Madame into a veritable frenzy of management. The marriage of the last of the de Ventadours should be solemnised with a splendour worthy of the most noble traditions of his house. Closeted all day with Pérone, her confidential maid, the old Comtesse planned and arranged: day after day couriers arrived from Avignon, from Lyons and from Marseilles, with samples and designs and suggestions for decorations, for banquets, for entertainments on a brilliant scale.

A whole fortnight went by in this whirl, old Madame having apparently eschewed all idea of mourning for her dead sister. There were consultations with Father Siméon-Luce too, the Bishop of Avignon must come over to perform the religious ceremony in the private chapel of the château: fresh altar-frontals and vestments must be ordered at Arles for the great occasion.

Old Madame's mood was electrical: Micheline quickly succumbed to it. She was young, and despite her physical infirmities, she was

woman enough to thrill at thoughts of a wedding, of pretty clothes, bridal bouquets and banquets. And she loved Rixende! the dainty fairy-like creature who, according to grandmama's unerring judgment, would resuscitate all the past splendours of the old château and make it resound once more with song and laughter.

Even the Comtesse Marcelle was not wholly proof against the atmosphere of excitement. Meetings were held in her room, and more than once she actually gave her opinion on the future choice of a dress for Micheline, or of a special dish for the wedding banquet.

Bertrand was expected three days after the New Year. Grandmama had decided that if he and M. de Peyron-Bompar started on the 29th, the day after the funeral, and they were not delayed anywhere owing to the weather conditions, they need not be longer than five days on the way. Whereupon she set to, and ordered Jasmin to recruit a few lads from La Bastide or Manosque, and to clean out the coach-house and the stables, and to lay in a provision of straw and forage, as M. le Comte de Ventadour would be arriving in a few days in his calèche with four horses and postilions.

Nor were her spirits affected by Bertrand's non-arrival. The weather accounted for

everything. The roads were blocked. If there had been a fall of snow here in the south, there must have been positive avalanches up in the north. And while the Comtesse Marcelle with her usual want of spirit began to droop once more after those few days of factitious well-being, old Madame's energies went on increasing, her activities never abated. She found in Micheline a willing, eager help, and a pale semblance of sympathy sprang up between the young cripple and the stately old grandmother over their feverish plans for Bertrand's wedding.

The tenth day after the New Year, the Comtesse Marcelle once more took to her couch. She had a serious fainting fit in the morning brought on by excitement when a carriage was heard to rattle along the road. When the sound died away and she realised that the carriage had not brought Bertrand, she slid down to the floor like a poor bundle of rags and was subsequently found, lying unconscious on the doorstep of her own room, where she had been standing waiting to clasp Bertrand in her arms.

Grandmama scolded her, tried to revive her spirits by discussing the decorations of Rix-ende's proposed boudoir, but Marcelle had

sunk back into her habitual listlessness and grandmama's grandiloquent plans only seemed to exacerbate her nerves. She fell from one fainting fit into another, the presence of Péronne was hateful to her, Micheline was willing but clumsy. The next day found her in a state of fever, wide-eyed, her cheeks of an ashen colour, her thin hands perpetually twitching, and a look of pathetic expectancy in her sunken, wearied face. In the end, though grandmama protested and brought forth the whole artillery of her sarcasm to bear against the project, Micheline walked over to the mas and begged Nicolette to come over and help her look after mother, who once or twice, when she moaned with the pain in her head, had expressed the desire to have the girl beside her. Of course Jaume Deydier protested, but as usual Nicolette had her way, and the next day found her installed as sick-nurse in the room of the Comtesse Marcelle. She only went home to sleep. It was decided that if the next two days saw no real improvement in the patient's condition, a messenger should be sent over to Pertuis to fetch a physician. For the moment she certainly appeared more calm, and seemed content that Nicolette should wait on her.

But on the fourteenth day, even old Madame appeared to be restless. All day she kept repeating to any one who happened to be nigh—to Micheline, to Pérone, to Jasmin—that the weather was accountable for Bertrand's delay, that he and M. de Peyron-Bompar would surely be here before nightfall, and that, whatever else happened, supper must be kept ready for the two travellers and it must be good and hot.

It was then four o'clock. The *volets* all along the façade of the château had been closed, and the curtains closed in all the rooms. The old Comtesse, impatient at her daughter-in-law's wan, reproachful looks, and irritated by Nicolette's presence in the invalid's room, had avoided it all day and kept to her own apartments, where Pérone, obsequious and sympathetic, was always ready to listen to her latest schemes and plans. Later on in the afternoon Micheline had been summoned to take coffee in grandmama's room, and as mother seemed inclined to sleep and Nicolette had promised not to go away till Micheline returned, the latter went readily enough. The question of Micheline's own dress for the wedding was to be the subject of debate, and Micheline, having kissed her mother, and made Nicolette swear to

come and tell her the moment the dear patient woke, ran over to grandmama's room.

Nicolette rearranged the pillows round Marcelle's aching head, then she sat down by the table, and took up her needlework. After awhile it certainly seemed as if the invalid slept. The house was very still. In the hearth a log of olive-wood crackled cheerfully. Suddenly Nicolette looked up from her work. She encountered Marcelle de Ventadour's eyes fixed upon her. They looked large, dark, eager. Nicolette felt that her own heart was beating furiously, and a wave of heat rushed to her cheeks. She had heard a sound, coming from the courtyard below—a commotion—the tramp of a horse's hoofs on the flagstones—she was sure of that—then the clanking of metal—a shout—Bertrand's voice—no doubt of that——

Marcelle had raised herself on her couch: a world of expectancy in her eyes. Nicolette threw down her work, and in an instant was out of the room and running along the gallery to the top of the stairs. Here she paused for a moment, paralysed with excitement: the next she heard the clang of the bolts being pulled open, the rattling of the chain, and Jasmin's cry of astonishment:

“M. le Comte!”

For the space of two seconds Nicolette hesitated between her longing to run down the stairs so as to be first to wish Tan-tan a happy New Year, and the wish to go back to the Comtesse Marcelle and see that the happy shock did not bring on an attack of fainting. The latter impulse prevailed. She turned and ran back along the gallery. But Marcelle de Ventadour had forestalled her. She stood on the threshold of her room, under the lintel. She had a candle in her hand and seemed hardly able to stand. In the flickering light, her features looked pinched and her face haggard: her hair was dishevelled and her eyes seemed preternaturally large. Nicolette ran to her, and was just in time to clasp the tottering form in her strong, steady arms.

“It is all right, madame,” she cried excitedly, her eyes full with tears of joy, “all right, it is Bertrand!”

“Bertrand,” the mother murmured feebly, and then reiterated, babbling like a child: “It is all right, it is Bertrand!”

Bertrand came slowly across the vestibule, then more slowly still up the stairs. The two women could not see him for the moment: they just heard his slow and heavy footstep coming

nearer and nearer. The well of the staircase was in gloom, only lit by an oil lamp that hung high up from the ceiling, and after a moment or two Bertrand came round the bend of the stairs and they saw the top of his head sunk between his shoulders. His shadow projected by the flickering lamp-light looked grotesque against the wall, all hunched-up, like that of an old man.

Nicolette murmured: "I'll run and tell Micheline and Mme. la Comtesse!" but suddenly Marcelle drew her back, back into the room. The girl felt scared: all her pleasure in Bertrand's coming had vanished. Somehow she wished that she had not seen him—that it was all a dream and that Bertrand was not really there. Marcelle had put the candle down on the table in the centre of the room. Her face looked very white, but her hands were quite steady; she turned up the lamp and blew out the candle and set it on one side, then she drew a chair close to the hearth, but she herself remained standing, only steadied herself with both her hands against the chair, and stared at the open doorway. All the while Nicolette knew that she must not run out and meet Bertrand, that she must not call to him to hurry. His mother wished that he should come into

her room, and tell her—tell her what? Nicolette did not know.

Now Bertrand was coming along the corridor. He paused one moment at the door: then he came in. He was in riding breeches and boots, and the collar of his coat was turned up to his ears: he held his riding whip in his gloved hand, but he had thrown down his hat, and his hair appeared moist and dishevelled. On the smooth blue cloth of his coat, myriads of tiny drops of moisture glistened like so many diamonds.

“It is snowing a little,” were the first words that he said. “I am sorry I am so wet.”

“Bertrand,” the mother cried in an agony of entreaty, “what is it?”

He stood quite still for a moment or two, and looked at her as if he thought her crazy for asking such a question. Then he came farther into the room, threw his whip down on the table and pulled off his gloves: but still he said nothing. His mother and Nicolette watched him; but Marcelle did not ask again. She just waited. Presently he sat down on the chair by the hearth, rested his elbows on his knees and held his hands to the blaze. Nicolette from where she stood could only see his

face in profile: it looked cold and pinched and his eyes stared into the fire.

"It is all over, mother," he said at last, "that is all."

Marcelle de Ventadour went up to her son, and put her thin hand on his shoulder.

"You mean——?" she murmured.

"Mme. de Mont-Pahon," he went on in a perfectly quiet, matter-of-fact tone of voice, "has left the whole of her fortune to her great-niece Rixende absolutely. Two hours after the reading of the will, M. de Peyron-Bompar came to me and told me in no measured language that having heard in what a slough of debt I and my family were wallowing, he would not allow his daughter's fortune to be dissipated in vain efforts to drag us out of that mire. He ended by declaring that all idea of my marrying Rixende must at once be given up."

Here his voice shook a little, and with a quick, impatient gesture he passed his hand across his brows. Marcelle de Ventadour said nothing for the moment. Her hand was still on his shoulder. Nicolette, who watched her closely, saw not the faintest sign of physical weakness in her quiet, silent attitude. Then as Bertrand was silent too, she asked after awhile:

"Did you speak to Rixende?"

"Did I speak to Rixende?" he retorted, and a hard, unnatural laugh broke from his parched, choking throat. "My God! until I spoke with her I had no idea how much humiliation a man could endure, and survive the shame of it."

He buried his face in his hands and a great sob shook his bent shoulders. Marcelle de Ventadour stared wide-eyed into the fire, and Nicolette, watching Tan-tan's grief, felt that Mother Earth could not hold greater misery for any child of hers than that which she endured at this moment.

"Rixende did not love you, Bertrand," the mother murmured dully, "she never loved you."

"She must have hated me," Bertrand rejoined quietly, "and now she despises me too. You should have heard her laugh, mother, when I spoke to her of our life here together in the old château——"

His voice broke. Of course he could not bear to speak of it: and Nicolette had to stand by, seemingly indifferent, whilst she saw great tears force themselves into his eyes. She longed to put her arms round him, to draw his head against her cheek, to smooth his hair and

kiss the tears away. Her heart was full with words of comfort, of hope, of love which, if only she dared, she would have given half her life to utter. But she was the stranger, the intruder even, at this hour. Except for the fact that she was genuinely afraid Marcelle de Ventadour might collapse at any moment, she would have slipped away unseen. Marcelle for the moment seemed to find in her son's grief, a measure of strength such as she had not known whilst she was happy. She had led such an isolated, self-centred life that she was too shy now to be demonstrative, and it was pathetic to watch the effort which she made to try and speak the words of comfort which obviously hovered on her lips; but nevertheless she stood by him, with her hand on his shoulder, and something of the magnetism of her love for him must have touched his senses, for presently he seized hold of her hand and pressed it against his lips.

The clock above the hearth ticked loudly with a nerve-racking monotony. The minutes sped on while Bertrand and his mother stared into the fire, both their minds a blank—grief having erased every other thought from their brain. Nicolette hardly dared to move. So far it seemed that Bertrand had remained en-

tirely unaware of her presence, and in her heart she prayed that he might not see her, lest he felt his humiliation and his misery more completely if he thought that she had witnessed it.

After awhile the Comtesse Marcelle said:

"You must be hungry, Bertrand, we'll let grandmama know you're here. She has ordered supper to be ready for you, as soon as you came."

Bertrand appeared to wake as if out of a dream.

"Did you *spéak*, mother?" he asked.

"You must be hungry, dear."

"Yes—yes!" he murmured vaguely. "Perhaps I am. It was a long ride from Pertuis—the roads are bad——"

"Grandmama has ordered——"

But quickly Bertrand seized his mother's hands again. "Don't tell grandmama yet," he said hoarsely. "I—I could not—not yet. . . ."

"But you must be hungry, dear," the mother insisted, "and grandmama will have to know," she added gently. "And there is Micheline!"

"Yes, I know," he retorted. "I am a fool—but—— Let us wait a little, shall we?"

Again he kissed his mother's hands, but he never once looked up into her face. Once

when the light from the lamp struck full upon him, Nicolette saw how much older he had grown, and that there was a look in his eyes as if he was looking into the future, and saw something there that was tragic and inevitable!

That look frightened her. But what could she do? Some one ought to be warned and Bertrand should not be allowed to remain alone—not for one moment. Did the mother realise this? Was this the reason why she remained standing beside him with her hand on his shoulder, as if to warn him or to protect?

Five minutes went by, perhaps ten! For Nicolette it was an eternity. Then suddenly grandmama's voice was heard from way down the gallery, obviously speaking to Jasmin:

"Why was I not told at once?"

After which there was a pause, and then footsteps along the corridor: Micheline's halting dot and carry one, grandmama's stately gait.

"I can't," Bertrand said and jumped to his feet. "You tell her, mother."

"Yes, yes, my dear," Marcelle rejoined soothingly, quite gently as if she were speaking to a sick child.

"Let me get away somewhere," he went on, "where she can't see me—not just yet—I can't——"

It was Nicolette who ran to the door which gave on Marcelle's bedroom, and threw it open.

"That's it, my dear," Marcelle said, and taking Bertrand's hand she led him towards the door. "Nicolette is quite right—go into my bedroom—I'll explain to grandmama."

"Nicolette?" Bertrand murmured and turned his eyes on her, as if suddenly made aware of her presence. A dark flush spread all over his face. "I didn't know she was here."

The two women exchanged glances. They understood one another. It meant looking after Bertrand, and, if possible, keeping old Madame from him for a little while.

Bertrand followed Nicolette into his mother's room. He did not speak to her again, but sank into a chair as if he were mortally tired. She went to a cupboard where a few provisions were always kept for Marcelle de Ventadour, in case she required them in the night: a bottle of wine and some cake. Nicolette put these on the table with a glass and poured out the wine.

"Drink it, Bertrand," she whispered, "it will please your mother."

Later she went back to the boudoir. Old Madame was standing in the middle of the

room, and as Nicolette entered she was saying tartly:

"But why was I not told?"

"I was just on the point of sending Nicolette to you, Madame——" Marcelle de Ventadour said timidly. Her voice was shaking, her face flushed and she wandered about the room, restlessly fingering the draperies. Whereupon the old Comtesse raised her lorgnette and stared at Nicolette.

"Ah!" she said coldly, "Mademoiselle Deydier has not yet gone?"

"She was just going, Madame," the younger woman rejoined, "when——"

"Then you have not yet seen Bertrand?" grandmama broke in.

"No," Marcelle replied, stammering and flushing, "that is——"

"What do you mean by 'No, . . . that is, . . .'?" old Madame retorted sharply. "Ah ça, my good Marcelle, what is all this mystery? Where is my grandson?"

"He was here a moment ago, he——"

"And where is M. de Peyron-Bompar?"

"He did not come. He is in Paris—that is—I think so——"

"M. de Peyron-Bompar not here? But——"

Suddenly she paused: and Nicolette who

watched her, saw that the last vestige of colour left her cheeks. Her eyelids fluttered for a moment or two, and her eyes narrowed, narrowed till they were mere slits. The Comtesse Marcelle stood by the table, steadying herself against it with her hand: but that hand was shaking visibly. Old Madame walked slowly, deliberately across the room until she came to within two steps of her daughter-in-law: then she said very quietly:

“What has happened to Bertrand?”

Marcelle de Ventadour gave a forced little laugh.

“Why, nothing, Madame,” she said. “What should have happened?”

“You are a fool, Marcelle,” grandmama went on with slow deliberation. “Your face and your hands have betrayed you. Tell me what has happened to Bertrand.”

“Nothing,” Marcelle replied, “nothing!” But her voice broke in a sob, she sank into a chair and hid her face in her hands.

“If you don’t tell me, I will think the worst,” old Madame continued quietly. “Jasmin has seen him. He is in the house. But he dare not face me. Why not?”

But Marcelle was at the end of her tether. Now she could do no more than moan and cry.

"His marriage with Rixende de Peyron-Bompar is broken off. Speak," the old woman added, and with her claw-like hand seized her daughter-in-law by the shoulder, "fool, can't you speak? *Nom de Dieu*, I'll have to know presently."

Her grip was so strong that involuntarily, Marcelle gave a cry of pain. This was more than Nicolette could stand: even her timidity gave way before her instinct of protection, of standing up for this poor, tortured, weak woman whom she loved because she was the mother of Tan-tan and suffered now almost as much as he did. She ran to Marcelle and put her arms round her, shielding her against further attack from the masterful, old woman.

"Mme. la Comtesse is overwrought," she said firmly, "or she would have said at once what has happened. M. le Comte has come home alone. Mme. de Mont-Pahon has left the whole of her fortune to Mlle. Rixende absolutely, and so she, and M. de Peyron-Bompar have broken off the marriage, and," she added boldly, "we are all thanking God that he has saved M. le Comte from those awful harpies!"

Old Madame had listened in perfect silence while Nicolette spoke: and indeed the girl her-

self could not help but pay a quick and grudging tribute of admiration to this old woman, who faithful to the traditions of her aristocratic forbears, received this staggering blow without flinching and without betraying for one instant what she felt. There was absolute silence in the room after that: only the clock continued its dreary and monotonous ticking. The Comtesse Marcelle lay back on her couch with eyes closed and a look almost of relief on her wan face, now that the dread moment had come and gone. Micheline had, as usual, taken refuge in the window embrasure and Nicolette knelt beside Marcelle, softly chafing her hands. Grandmama was still standing beside the table, lorgnette in hand, erect and unmoved.

"Bertrand," she said after awhile, "is in there, I suppose." And with her lorgnette she pointed to the bedroom door, which Nicolette had carefully closed when she entered, drawing the heavy portière before it, so as to prevent the sound of voices from penetrating through. Nicolette hoped that Bertrand had heard nothing of what had gone on in the boudoir, and now when grandmama pointed toward the door, she instinctively rose to her feet as if making ready to stand between this irascible old woman and the grief-stricken man.

But old Madame only shrugged her shoulders and looked down with unconcealed contempt on her daughter-in-law.

"I ought to have guessed," she said dryly, "What a fool you are, my good Marcelle!"

Then she paused a moment and added slowly as if what she wished to say caused her a painful effort.

"I suppose Bertrand said nothing about money?"

Marcelle de Ventadour opened her eyes and murmured vaguely:

"Money?"

"Pardi!" grandmama retorted impatiently, "the question of money will loom largely in this affair presently, I imagine. There are Bertrand's debts——"

Again she shrugged her shoulders with an air of indifference, as if that matter was unworthy of her consideration.

"I suppose that his creditors, when they heard that the marriage was broken off, flocked around him like vultures.—Did he not speak of that?"

Slowly Marcelle raised herself from her couch. Her eyes circled with deep purple rims looked large and glowing, as they remained fixed upon her mother-in-law.

"No," she said tonelessly, "Bertrand is too broken-hearted at present to think of money."

"He will have to mend his heart then," grandmama rejoined dryly, "those sharks will be after him soon."

Marcelle threw back her head, and for a moment looked almost defiant:

"The debts which he contracted, he did at your bidding, Madame," she said.

"Of course he did, my good Marcelle," old Madame retorted coldly, "but the creditors will want paying all the same. If the marriage had come about, this would have been easy enough, as I told you at the time. Bertrand was a fool not to have known how to win that jade's affections."

A cry of indignation rose to the mother's throat.

"Oh!"

"Eh, what?" Madame riposted unmoved. "Young men have before now succeeded in gaining a woman's love, even when she sat on a mountain of money-bags and he had not even one to fasten to his saddle-bow. It should have been easier for Bertrand with his physique and his accomplishments to win a woman's love than it will be for him to pay his debts."

"You know very well," Marcelle cried, "that he cannot do that."

"That is why we shall have to think of something," grandmama retorted, and at that moment went deliberately towards the door. Her hand was already on the portière and Nicolette stood by undecided what she should do, when suddenly Marcelle sprang forward more like a wild animal, defending its young, than an ailing, timid woman: she interposed her slim, shrunken form between the door and the old woman, and whispered hoarsely, but commandingly:

"What do you want with Bertrand?"

Old Madame, taken aback, raised her aristocratic eyebrows: she looked her daughter-in-law ironically up and down, then, as was her wont, she shrugged her shoulders and tried to push her aside.

"My dear Marcelle," she said icily, "have you taken leave of your senses?"

"No," Marcelle replied, in a voice which she was endeavouring to keep steady. "I only want to know what you are going to say to Bertrand."

"That will depend on what he tells me," grandmama went on coldly. "You do not sup-

pose, I presume, that the future can be discussed without my having a say in it?"

"Certainly not," the younger woman rejoined, "seeing that the present is entirely of your making."

"Then I pray you let me go to Bertrand. I wish to speak with him."

"We'll call him. And you shall speak with him in my presence."

Now she spoke quite firmly: her face was very pale and her eyes certainly had a wild look in them. With a mechanical gesture she pushed the unruly strands of her hair from her moist forehead. Old Madame gazed at her for a moment or two in silence, then she broke into harsh, ironical laughter.

"*Ah ça, ma mie!*" she said, "Will you tell me, I pray, what is the exact meaning of this melodramatic scene?"

"I have already told you," Marcelle replied more calmly, "if you wish to speak with Bertrand, we'll call him, and you shall speak with him here."

"Bertrand and I understand one another. We prefer to talk together, when we are alone."

"The matter that concerns him concerns us

all equally. You may speak with him if you wish—but only in my presence.”

“But, *nom de Dieu!*” old Madame exclaimed, “will you tell me by what right you propose to stand between me and my grandson?”

“By the right which you gave me, Madame,” Marcelle replied with slow deliberation, “when you stood between your son and me.”

“Marcelle!” the old woman cried, and her harsh voice for the first time had in it a quiver of latent passion.

“The evil which you wrought that night,” Marcelle went on slowly, “shall not find its echo now. I was really a fool then. Such monsters as you had never been within my ken.”

“Silence, you idiot!” old Madame broke in, throwing into her tone and into her attitude all the authority which she knew so well how to exert. But Marcelle would not be silenced. She was just one of those weak, down-trodden creatures who, when roused, are as formidable in their wrath as they are obstinate in their purpose. She spoke now as if for the past twenty years she had been longing for this relief and the words tumbled out of her mouth

like an avalanche falls down the side of a mountain.

"An idiot!" she exclaimed. "Yes, you are right there, Madame! A dolt and a fool! but, thank God, sufficiently sane to-night to prevent your staining your hands with my son's blood, as you did with that of his father. Had I not been a fool, should I not have guessed your purpose that night?—then, too, you wished to speak with your son alone—then too you wished to discuss the future after you had dragged him down with you into a morass of debts and obligations which he could not meet. To satisfy your lust for pomp, and for show, you made him spend and borrow, and then when the day of reckoning came——"

"Silence, Marcelle!"

"When the day of reckoning came," Marcelle reiterated coldly, "you, his mother, placed before him the only alternative that your damnable pride would allow—a pistol which you, yourself, put into his hand."

"My son preferred death to dishonour," old Madame put in boldly.

"At his mother's command," the other retorted. "Oh! you thought I did not know, you thought I did not guess. But—you remember—it was midsummer—the window was open

—I was down in the garden—I heard your voice: ‘My son, there is only one way open for a de Ventadour!’ I ran into the house, I ran up the stairs—you remember?—I was on the threshold when rang the pistol shot which at your bidding had ended his dear life.”

“What I did then is between me and my conscience——”

“Perhaps,” Marcelle replied, “but for what you do now, you will answer to me. I suffered once—I will not suffer again——”

Again with that same wild gesture she pushed her hair away from her forehead. Nicolette thought that she was on the point of swooning, but her excitement gave her strength: she pulled herself together, drew the portière aside, opened the door, and went through into the other room.

Grandmama appeared for a moment undecided: that her pride had received a severe shaking, there could be no doubt: for once she had been routed in a wordy combat with the woman whom she affected to despise. But she was too arrogant, too dictatorial to argue, where she had failed to command. Perhaps she knew that her influence over Bertrand would not be diminished by his mother’s interference. She was not ashamed of that dark

page in the past history : her notions of honour, and of what was due to the family name were not likely to be modified by the ravings of a sick imbecile. She was fond of Bertrand and proud of him, but if the cataclysm which she dreaded did eventually come about, she would still far sooner see him dead than dishonoured. A debtor's prison was no longer an impossibility for a de Ventadour ; the principles of equality born of that infamous Revolution, and fostered by that abominable Corsican upstart had not been altogether eliminated from the laws of France with the restoration of her Bourbon kings. Everything nowadays was possible, even, it seems, the revolt of weak members of a family against its acknowledged head.

Marcelle had gone through into the next room without caring whether her mother-in-law followed her or not. Just as she entered she was heard to call her son's name, tenderly, and as if in astonishment. Old Madame then took a step forward and peeped through the door. Then she threw back her head and laughed.

"What an anti-climax, eh, my good Marcelle," she said with cool sarcasm. "See what a fool you were to make such a scene. While

you spouted heroics at me about pistols and suicide, the boy was comfortably asleep. When he wakes," she added lightly, "send him to me, and you may chaperon him if you like. I do not see a tragedy in this sleeping prince."

With that she went: and Nicolette ran into the next room. The Comtesse Marcelle was on the verge of a collapse. Nicolette contrived to undress her and put her to bed. Bertrand did not stir. He had drunk a couple of glasses of wine and eaten some of the cake, then apparently his head had fallen forward over his arms, and leaning right across the table he had fallen asleep. The sound of voices had not roused him. He was so tired, so tired! Nicolette, while she looked after Marcelle, was longing to undo Bertrand's heavy boots, and place a cushion for his head, and make him lean back in his chair. This was such an uncomfortable, lonely house, lonely for every one except old Madame, who had Pérone to look after her. Marcelle and poor little Micheline looked after themselves, and Bertrand only had old Jasmin. During Mlle. de Peyron-Bompar's visit last May, some extra servants had been got in to make a show. They had been put into smart liveries for the time being, but had since gone away again. It was all

a very dreary homecoming for Tan-tan, and Nicolette, who longed to look after his creature comforts, was forced to go away before she could do anything for him.

Marcelle de Ventadour kissed and thanked her. She assured her that she felt well and strong. Pérone, though dour and repellent, would come and see to her presently, and Micheline slept in a room close by. Between them they would look after Bertrand when he woke from this long sleep. The supper ordered for two was still there. Jasmin would see to it that Bertrand had all that he wanted.

A little reassured, Nicolette went away at last, promising to come again the next day. Micheline accompanied her as far as the main door: the girl had said absolutely nothing during the long and painful scene which had put before her so grim a picture of the past: she was so self-centred, so reserved, that not even to Nicolette did she reveal what she had felt: only she clung more closely than even before to the friend whom she loved: and when the two girls finally said "good night" to one another they remained for a long time clasped in one another's arms.

"Bertrand will be all right now," Nicolette whispered in the end, "I don't think old Ma-

dame will want to see him, and he is so tired that he will not even think. But do not leave him too much alone, Micheline. Promise!"

And Micheline promised.

CHAPTER XI

GREY DAWN

STRANGE that it should all have happened in the grey dawn of a cold winter's morning. Nicolette, when she came home afterwards and thought it all out, marvelled whether the grey sky, the muffled cadence of the trees, the mysterious pallidity of the woods were a portent of the future. And yet if it had to be done all over again, she would not have acted differently, and minute by minute, hour by hour, it seemed as if destiny had guided her—or God's hand, perhaps! Oh, surely it was God's hand.

She rose early because she had passed a restless, miserable night, also her head ached and she longed for fresh air. It was still dark, but Margai was astir, and a bright fire was blazing in the kitchen when Nicolette came down. She was not hungry, but to please Margai she drank some warm milk and ate the home-made bread, and when the cold morning light first

peeped in through the open window, she set out for a walk.

She went down the terraced gradients into the valley, and turned to wander up the river bank, keeping her shawl closely wrapped around her shoulders, as it was very cold. The Lèze, swelled by the early winter's rains, tossed and tumbled in its bed with fretful turbulence. The snow lay deep in untidy little heaps in all sorts of unexpected nooks and crannies, but the smooth surfaces of the boulders were shiny with dewy frost and the blades of the rough grass were heavy with moisture.

The air was very still, and slowly the silvery dawn crept up behind the canopy of clouds, and transformed it into a neutral tinted veil that hung loosely over the irregular heights of Luberon and concealed the light that lay beyond. One by one the terraced slopes emerged from the pall of night, and the moist blades of grass turned to strings of tiny diamonds. A pallid argent hue lay over mountain and valley, and every leaf of every tree became a looking-glass that mirrored the colourless opalescence of the sky.

When Nicolette started out for this early morning walk she had no thought of meeting

Bertrand. Indeed she had no thought of anything beyond a desire to be alone, and to still the restlessness which had kept her awake all night. Anon she reached the pool and the great boulder that marked the boundary of Paul et Virginie's island, and she came to a halt beside the carob tree on the spot hallowed by all the cherished memories of the past.

And suddenly she saw Bertrand.

He too had wandered along the valley by the bank of the stream, and Nicolette felt that it was her intense longing for him that had brought him hither to this land of yore.

How it all came about she could not have told you. Bertrand looked as if he had not slept: his eyes were ringed with purple, he was hatless, and his hair clung dishevelled and moist against his forehead. Nicolette led the way to the old olive tree, and there they stood together for awhile, and she made him tell her all about himself. At first it seemed as if it hurt him to speak at all, but gradually his reserve appeared to fall away from him: he talked more and more freely! he spoke of his love for Rixende, how it had sprung into being at first sight of her: he spoke of the growth of his love through days of ardour and nights of longing, when, blind to all save the

beauty of her, he would have laid down his life to hold her in his arms. He also spoke of that awful day of humiliation and of misery when he dragged himself on his knees at her feet like an abject beggar imploring one crumb of pity, and saw his love spurned, his ideal shattered, and his father's shame flung into his face like a soiled rag.

What he had been unable to say to his mother he appeared to speak of with real relief to Nicolette. He seemed like a man groaning under a heavy load, who is gradually being eased of his burden. He owned that for hours after that terrible day he had been a prey to black despair: it was only the thought of his father's disgrace and of his mother's grief that kept him from the contemplation of suicide. But his career was ended: soon those harpies, who were counting on his wealthy marriage to exact their pound of flesh from him, would fall on him like a cloud of locusts, and to the sorrow in his heart would be added the dishonour of his name. His happiness had fled on the wings of disappointment and disillusion.

"The Rixende whom I loved," he said, "never existed. She was just a creation of my own brain, born of a dream. The woman who jeered at me because I loved her and had

nothing to offer her but my love, was a stranger whom I had never known."

Was it at that precise moment that the thought took shape in her mind, or had it always been there? Always? When she used to run after him and thrust her baby hand into his palm? Or when she gazed up-stream, pretending that the Lèze was the limitless ocean, on which never a ship appeared to take her and Tan-tan away from their island of bliss? All the dreams of her girlhood came floating, like pale, ghostlike visions, before Nicolette's mind; dreams when she wandered hand in hand with Tan-tan up the valley and the birds around her sang a chorus: "He loves thee, passionately!" Dreams when he was gay and happy, and they would laugh together and sing till the mountain peaks gave echo to their joy! Dreams when, wearied or sad, he would pillow his head on her breast, and allow her to stroke his hair, and to whisper soft words of comfort, or sing to him his favourite songs.

Those dream visions had long since receded into forgetfulness, dispelled by the masterful hand of a beautiful woman with gentian-blue eyes and a heart of stone. Was this the hour to recall them from never-never land? to let them float once more before her mind? and was

this the hour to lend an ear to the sweet insidious voice that whispered: "Why not?" even on this cold winter's morning, when a pall of grey monotone lay over earth and sky, when the winter wind souged drearily through the trees, and every bird-song was stilled?

Is there a close time for love? Perhaps. But there is none for that sweet and gentle pity which is the handmaid of the compelling Master of the Universe. The sky might be grey, the flowers dead and the birds still, but Nicolette's heart whispered to her that Tan-tan was in pain; he had been hurt in his love, in his pride, in that which he held dearer than everything in life: the honour of his name. And she, Nicolette, had it in her power to shield him, his honour and his pride, whilst in her heart there was such an infinity of love, that the wounds which he had endured would be healed by its magical power.

How it came about she knew not. He had spoken and he was tired: shame and sorrow had brought tears to his eyes. Then all of a sudden she put out her arms and drew his head down upon her breast. Like a mother crooning over her sick baby, she soothed and comforted him: and words of love poured out from her heart as nectar from an hallowed

vessel, and in her eyes there glowed a light of such perfect love and such sublime surrender, that he, dazed at first, not understanding, could but listen in silence, and let this marvellous ray of hope slowly filtrate through the darkness of his despair.

"Nicolette," he cried the moment he could realise what it was she was saying, "do you really love me enough to——"

But she quickly put her hand over his mouth.

"Ask me no question, Tan-tan," she said. "I have always loved you, neither more nor less—just loved you always—and now that you are in trouble and really need me, how can you ask if I love you enough?"

"Your father will never permit it, Nicolette," he said soberly after a while.

"He will permit it," she rejoined simply, "because now I should die if anything were to part us."

"If only I could be worthy of your love, little one," he murmured ruefully.

"Hush, my dear," she whispered in reply. "In love no one is either worthy or unworthy. If you love me, then you have given me such a priceless treasure that I should not even envy the angels up in heaven."

"If I love you, sweetheart!" he sighed, and

a sharp pang of remorse shot through his heart.

But she was content even with this semblance of love. Never of late, in her happiest dreams, had she thought it possible that she and Tan-tan would ever really belong to one another. Oh! she had no illusions as to the present: the image of that blue-eyed little fiend had not been wholly eradicated from his heart, but so long as she had him she would love him so much, so much, that in time he would forget everything save her who made him happy.

They talked for awhile of the future: she would not see that in his heart he was ashamed—ashamed of her generosity and of his own weakness for accepting it. But she had found the right words, and he had been in such black despair that this glorious future which she held out before him was like a vision of paradise, and he was young and human, and did not turn his back on his own happiness. Then, as time was getting on, they remembered that there was a world besides themselves: a world to which they would now have to return and which they would have to face. It was no use restarting a game of "Let's pretend!" on their desert island. A ship had come in sight on the limitless ocean, and they must make ready to go back.

Hand in hand they wandered down the valley. It was just like one of those pictures of which Nicolette had dreamed. She and Tantan alone together, the Lèze murmuring at their feet, the sougning of the trees making sweet melody as they walked. Way up in the sky a thin shaft of brilliant light had rent the opalescent veil and tinged the heights of Luberon with gold. The warm sun of Provence would have its way. It tore at that drab grey veil, tore and tore, until the rent grew wider and the firmament over which he reigned was translucent and blue. The leaves on the trees mirrored the azure of the sky, the mountain stream gurgled and whispered with a sound like human laughter, and from a leafy grove of winter oak a pair of pigeons rose and flew away over the valley, and disappeared in the nebulous ether beyond.

CHAPTER XII

FATHER

THERE was the natural longing to keep one's happiness to oneself just for a little while, and Nicolette decided that it would be better for Bertrand to wait awhile before coming over to the mas, until she herself had had an opportunity of speaking with her father. For the moment she felt that she was walking on clouds, and that it would be difficult to descend to earth sufficiently to deceive both father and Margai. Nor did she deceive either of them.

"What is the matter with the child?" Jaume Deydier said after midday dinner, when Nicolette ran out of the room singing and laughing in response to nothing at all.

And Margai shrugged her shoulders. She could not think. Deydier suggested that perhaps Ameyric . . . Eh, what? Girls did not know their own hearts until a man came along and opened the little gate with his golden key. Margai shrugged her shoulders again: this time

out of contempt for a man's mentality. It was not Ameyric of a surety who had the power to make Nicolette sing and laugh as she had not done for many a month, or to bring that glow into her cheeks and the golden light into her eyes. No, no, it was not Ameyric!

Then as the afternoon wore on and the shades of evening came creeping round the corners of the cosy room, Jaume Deydier sat in his chair beside the hearth in which great, hard olive logs blazed cheerfully. He was in a soft and gentle mood. And Nicolette told him all that had happened . . . to Bertrand and to her.

Jaume Deydier heard the story of Mme. de Mont-Pahon's will, and of Rixende's cruelty, with a certain grim satisfaction. He was sorry for the Comtesse Marcelle—very sorry—but the blow would fall most heavily on old Madame, and for once she would see all her schemes tumbling about her ears like a house of cards.

Then Nicolette knelt down beside him and told him everything. Her walk this morning, her meeting with Bertrand: her avowal of love and offer of marriage.

"It came from me, father dear," she said softly, "Bertrand would never have dared."

Deydier had not put in one word while his daughter spoke. He did not even look at her, only stared into the fire. When she had finished he said quietly:

"And now, little one, all that you can do is to forget all about this morning's walk and what has passed between you and M. le Comte de Ventadour!"

"Father!"

"Understand me, my dear once and for all," Deydier went on quite unmoved; "never with my consent will you marry one of that brood."

Nicolette was silent for a moment or two. She had expected opposition, of course. She knew her father and his dearly-loved scheme that she should marry young Barnadou: she also knew that deep down in his heart there was a bitter grudge against old Madame. What this grudge was she did not know, but she had complete faith in her father's love, and in any case she would be fighting for her happiness. So she put her arms around him and leaned her head against his shoulder, in that cajoling manner which she had always found irresistible.

"Father," she whispered, "you are speaking about my happiness."

"Yes," he said with a dull sigh of weariness, "I am."

"Of my life, perhaps."

"Nicolette," the father cried, with a world of anxiety, of reproach, of horror in his tone.

But Nicolette knelt straight before him now, sitting on her heels, her hands clasped before her, her eyes fixed quite determinedly on his face.

"I love Bertrand, father," she said simply, "and he loves me."

"My child——"

"He loves me," Nicolette reiterated with firm conviction. "A woman is never mistaken over that, you know."

"A woman perhaps, my dear," the father retorted gently, and passed a hand that shook a little over her hair: "but you are such a child, my little Nicolette. You have never been away from our mountains and our skies, where God's world is pure and simple. What do you know of evil?"

"There is no evil in Bertrand's love for me," she protested.

"Bah! there is evil in all the de Ventadours. They are all tainted with the mania for show and for wealth. And now that they are bankrupt in pocket as well as in honour, they hope

to regild their stained escutcheon with your money——”

“That is false!” Nicolette broke in vehemently, “no one at the château knows that Bertrand and I love one another. A few hours ago he did not know that I cared for him.”

“A few hours ago he knew that his father’s fate was at his door. He is up to his eyes in debt; nothing can save even the roof over his head; his mother, his sister and that old harpy his grandmother have nothing ahead of them but beggary. Then suddenly you come to him with sweet words prompted by your dear kind heart, and that man, tottering on the brink of an awful precipice, sees a prop that will save him from stumbling headlong down. The Deydier money, he says to himself, why not indeed? True I shall have to stoop and marry the daughter of a vulgar peasant, but I can’t have the money without the wife, and so I’ll take her, and when I have got her, I can return to my fine friends in Paris, to the Court of Versailles and all the gaieties, and she poor fool can stay at home and nurse my mother or attend to the whims of old Madame; and if she frets and repines and eats out her heart with loneliness down at my old owl’s nest in Prov-

ence, well then I shall be rid of her all the sooner. . . .”

“Father!” Nicolette cried with sudden passionate intensity which she made no attempt to check. “What wrong has Bertrand done to you that you should be willing to sacrifice my happiness to your revenge?”

A harsh laugh came from Jaume Deydier’s choking throat.

“Revenge?” he exclaimed. And then again: “Revenge?”

“Yes, revenge!” Nicolette went on with glowing eyes and flaming cheeks. “Oh, I know! I know! There is a dark page somewhere in our family history connected with the château, and because of that—because of that——”

Her voice broke in a sob. She was crouching beside the hearth at her father’s feet, and for a moment he looked down at her as if entirely taken aback by her passionate protest. Life had always gone on so smoothly at the mas, that Jaume Deydier had until now never realised that the motherless baby whom he had carried about in his arms had become a woman with a heart, and a mind and passions of her own. It had never struck him that his daughter—little Nicolette with the bright eyes and

the merry laugh, the child that toddled after him, obedient and loving—would one day wish to frame her destiny apart from him, apart from her old home.

A child! A child! He had always thought of her as a child—then as a growing girl who would marry Ameyric Barnadou one day, and in due course present her husband with a fine boy or two and perhaps a baby girl that would be the grandfather's joy!

But this girl!—this woman with the flaming eyes in which glowed passion, reproach, an indomitable will; this woman whose voice, whose glance expressed the lust of a fight for her love and her happiness!—was this his Nicolette?

Ah! here was a problem, the like of which had never confronted Jaume Deydier's even existence before now. How he would deal with it he did not yet know. He was a silent man and not fond of talking, and, after her passionate outburst, Nicolette, too, had lapsed into silence. She still crouched beside her father's chair, squatting on her heels, and gazing into the fire. Deydier stroked her soft brown hair with a tender hand. He loved the child more than anything in the whole world. To her happiness he would have sacrificed every-

thing including his life, but in his own mind he was absolutely convinced that Bertrand de Ventadour had only sought her for her money, and that nothing but sorrow would come of this unequal marriage—if the marriage was allowed to take place, which, please God, it never would whilst he, Deydier, was alive. . . . But as he himself was a man whose mind worked with great deliberation, he thought that time and quietude would act more potently than words on Nicolette's present mood. He was quite sure that at any rate nothing would be gained at this moment by further talk. She was too overwrought, too recently under the influence of Bertrand to listen to reason now. Time would show. Time would tell. Time and Nicolette's own sound sense and pride. So Deydier sat on in his arm-chair, and said nothing, and presently he asked his girl to get him his pipe, which she did. She lighted it for him, and as she stood there so close to him with the lighted tinder in her hand, he saw that her eyes were dry, and that the glow had died out of her cheeks. He pulled at his pipe in a moody, abstracted way, and fell to meditating—as he so often did—on the past. There was a tragedy in his life connected with those Ventadours. He had never spoken of it to any

one since the day of his marriage, not even to old Margai, who knew all about it, and he had sworn to himself at one time that he would never tell Nicolette.

But now——

So deeply had he sunk in meditation that he did not notice that Nicolette presently went out of the room.

Margai brought in the lamp an hour later.

"I did not want to disturb you," she said as she set it on the table, "but it is getting late now."

"Well?" she went on after awhile, seeing that Deydier made no comment, that his pipe had gone out, and that he was staring moodily into the fire. Even now he gave her no reply, although she rattled the silver on the side-board so as to attract his attention. Finally, she knelt down in front of the hearth and made a terrific clatter with the fire-irons. Even then, Jaume Deydier only said: "Well?" too.

"Has the child told you anything?" Margai went on tartly. She had never been kept out of family councils before and had spent the last hour in anticipation of being called into the parlour.

"Why, what should she tell me?" Deydier retorted with exasperating slowness.

"*Tiens!* that she is in love with Bertrand de Ventadour, and wants to marry him."

Deydier gave a startled jump as if a pistol shot had rung in his ear, and his pipe fell with a clatter to the ground.

"Nicolette in love with Bertrand," he cried with well-feigned astonishment. "Whoever told thee such nonsense?"

"No one," the old woman replied dryly. "I guessed."

Then as Deydier relapsed into moody silence, she added irritably:

"Don't deny it, Mossou Deydier. The child told you."

"I don't deny it," he replied gravely.

"And what did you say?"

"That never while I live would she marry a de Ventadour."

"Hm!" was the only comment made on this by Margai. And after awhile she added:

"And where is the child now?"

"I thought," Deydier replied, "that she was in the kitchen with thee."

"I have not seen her these two hours past."

"She is not in her room?"

"No!"

"Then, maybe, she is in the garden."

"Maybe. It is a fine night."

There the matter dropped for the moment. It was not an unusual thing for Nicolette to run out into the garden at all hours of the day or evening, and to stay out late, and Deydier was not surprised that the child should have wished to be let in peace for awhile. Margai went back to her kitchen to see about supper, and Deydier lighted a second pipe: a very unusual thing for him to do. At seven o'clock Margai put her head in through the door.

"The child is not in yet," she said laconically, "and she is not in the garden. I have been round to see."

"Didst call for her, Margai?" Deydier asked.

"Aye! I called once or twice. Then I stood at the gate thinking I would see her go up the road. She should be in by now. It has started to rain."

Deydier jumped to his feet.

"Raining," he exclaimed, "and the child out at this hour? Why didst not come sooner, Margai, and tell me?"

"She is often out later than this," was Margai's reply. "But she usually comes in when it rains."

"Did she take a cloak with her when she went?"

"She has her shawl. Maybe," the old woman added after a slight pause, "she went to meet him somewhere."

To this suggestion Deydier made no reply, but it seemed to Margai that he muttered an oath between his teeth, which was a very unusual thing for Mossou Jaume to do. Without saying another word, however, he stalked out of the parlour, and presently Margai heard his heavy footstep crossing the corridor and the vestibule, then the opening and the closing of the front door.

She shook her head dolefully while she began to lay the cloth for supper.

Jaume Deydier had thrown his coat across his shoulders, thrust his cap on his head and picked up a stout stick and a storm lantern, then he went down into the valley. It was raining now, a cold, unpleasant rain mixed with snow, and the *tramontane* blew mercilessly from way over Vaucluse. Deydier muttered a real oath this time, and turned up the road in the direction of the château. It was very dark and the rain beat all around his shoulders: but when he thought of Bertrand de

Ventadour, he gripped his stick more tightly, and he ceased to be conscious of the wet or the cold.

He had reached the sharp bend in the road where the stony bridle-path, springing at a right angle, led up to the gates of the château, and he was on the point of turning up the path when he heard his name called close behind him:

“Hey, Mossou Deydier! Is that you?”

He turned and found himself face to face with Pérone, old Madame’s confidential maid—a person whom he could not abide.

“Are you going up to the château, Mossou Deydier?” the woman went on with an ugly note of obsequiousness in her harsh voice.

“Yes,” Deydier replied curtly, and would have gone on, on his way, but Pérone suddenly took hold of him by the coat.

“Mossou Deydier,” she said pitiably, “it would be only kind to a poor old woman, if you would let her walk with you. It is so lonely and so dark. I have come all the way from Manosque. I waited there for awhile, thinking the rain would give over. It was quite fine when I left home directly after dinner.”

Deydier let her talk on. He could not bear

the woman, but he was man enough not to let her struggle on in the dark behind him, whilst he had his lanthorn to guide his own footsteps up the uneven road; and so they walked on side by side for a minute or two, until Pérone said suddenly:

"I hope Mademoiselle Nicolette has reached home by now. I told her——"

"You saw Mademoiselle Nicolette?" Deydier broke in harshly, "where?"

"Just above La Bastide, Mossou Deydier," the woman replied. "You know where she and Mossou le Comte used to fish when they were children. It was raining hard already and I told her——"

But Deydier was in no mood to listen further. Without any ceremony, or word of excuse, he turned on his heel and strode rapidly down the road, swinging his lanthorn and gripping his stick, leaving Pérone to go or come, or stand still as she pleased.

Moodiness and wrath had suddenly given place to a sickening feeling of anxiety. The rain beat straight into his face as he turned his steps up the valley, keeping close to the river bank, but he did not feel either the wind or the rain: in the dim circle of light which the lanthorn threw before him he seemed to see his

little Nicolette, grief-stricken, distraught, beside that pool that would murmur insidious, poisoned words, promises of peace and forgetfulness. And at sight of this spectral vision a cry like that of a wounded beast came from the father's overburdened heart.

"Not again, my God!" he exclaimed, "not again! I could not bear it! Faith in Thee would go, and I should blaspheme!"

He saw her just as he had pictured her, crouching against the large boulder that sheltered her somewhat against the wind and rain. Just above her head the heavy branches of an old carob tree swayed under the breath of the *tramontane*: at her feet the waters of the Lèze, widening at this point into a pool, lapped the edge of her skirt and of the shawl which had slipped from her shoulders.

She was not entirely conscious, and the wet on her cheeks did not wholly come from the rain. Jaume Deydier was a big, strong man, he was also a silent one. After one exclamation of heart-broken grief and of horror, he had gathered his little girl in his arms, wrapped his own coat round her, and, holding on to the lanthorn at the same time, he set out for home.

CHAPTER XIII

MAN TO MAN

JAUME DEYDIER did not say anything to Nicolette that evening. After he had deposited her on her bed and handed her over to Margai he knew that the child would be well and safe. Sleep and Margai's household remedies would help the child's robust constitution to put up a good fight.

And Nicolette lay all the evening, and half the night, wide-eyed and silent between the sheets; quite quiescent and obedient whenever Margai brought her something warm to drink. But she would not eat, and when early the next morning Margai brought her some warm milk, she looked as if she had not slept. She had a little fever during the night, but by the morning this had gone, only her face looked white and pinched, and her eyes looked preternaturally large with great dark rings around them.

Later on in the morning her father came and stood for a second or two silently beside her bed. Her eyes were closed when he came, but

presently, as if drawn by the magnetism of his tender gaze, the heavy lids slowly opened, and she looked at him. She looked so pale and so small in the big bed, and there was such a look of sorrow around her drooping mouth, that Deydier's heart ached almost to the point of breaking, and great tears gathered in his eyes and rolled slowly down his rough cheeks.

The child drew a long sigh of tenderness, almost of pity, and put out her arms. He gathered her to his breast, pillowing the dear head against his heart, while he could scarcely control the heavy sobs that shook his powerful shoulders, or stay the tears that wetted her curls.

"My Nicolette!" he murmured somewhat incoherently. "My little Nicolette, thou'lt not do it, my little girl, not that—not that—I could not bear it."

Then he laid her down again upon the pillows, and kissed away the tears upon her cheeks.

"Father," she murmured, and fondled his hand which she had captured, "you must try and forgive me, I was stupid and thoughtless. I ought to have explained better. But I was unhappy, very unhappy. Then I don't know how it all happened—I did not look where I

was going, I suppose—and I stumbled and fell—it was stupid of me,” she reiterated with loving humility; “but I forgot the time, the weather—everything—I was so unhappy——”

“So unhappy that you forgot your poor old father,” he said, trying to smile, “whose only treasure you are in this world.”

“No, dear,” she replied earnestly. “I did not forget you. On the contrary, I thought and thought about you, and wondered how you could be so unkind.”

He gave a quick, weary sigh.

“We won’t speak about that now, my child,” he said gently, “all you have to do is to get well.”

“I am well, dear,” she rejoined, and as he tried to withdraw his hand she grasped it closer and held it tightly against her bosom:

“When Bertrand comes,” she entreated, “will you see him?”

But he only shook his head, whereupon she let go his hand and turned her face away. And he went dejectedly out of the room.

Bertrand came over to the mas in the early part of the forenoon. Vague hints dropped by Pérone had already alarmed him, and he spent

a miserable evening and a sleepless night marvelling what had happened.

As soon as he returned from the marvellous walk which had changed the whole course of his existence, he had told his mother and Micheline first, then grandmama, what had happened. Marcelle de Ventadour, who, during the past four and twenty hours had been in a state of prostration, due partly to sorrow and anxiety for her son, and partly to the reaction following on excitement, felt very much like one who has been at death's door and finds himself unaccountably alive again. She was fond of Nicolette in a gentle, unemotional way: she knew that Deydier was very rich and his daughter his sole heiress, and she had none of those violent caste prejudices which swayed old Madame's entire life; moreover, she had never been able to endure Rixende's petulant tempers and supercilious ways. All these facts conduced to make her contented, almost happy, in this new turn of events.

Not so old Madame! Bertrand's news at first appeared to her unworthy of consideration: the boy, she argued, partly to herself, partly to him, had been inveigled at a moment when he was too weak and too wretched to defend himself, by a designing minx who had a

coronet and a fine social position in her mind's eye. The matter was not worth talking about. It just would not be: that was all. When she found that not only did Bertrand mean to go through with this preposterous marriage, but that he defended Nicolette and sang her praises with passionate warmth, she fell from contempt into amazement and thence into wrath.

It should not be! It was preposterous! Impossible! A Comte de Ventadour marry the descendant of a lacquey! the daughter of a peasant! It should not be! not whilst she was alive. Thank God, she still had a few influential friends in Paris, she would petition the King to forbid the marriage.

"You would not dare——" Bertrand protested vehemently.

But old Madame only laughed.

"Dare?" she said tartly. "Of course I should dare. I have dared more than that before now, let me tell you, in order to save the honour of the Ventadours. That marriage can *not* be," she went on determinedly, "and if you are too foolish or too blind to perceive the disgrace of such a *mésalliance*, then I will apply to the King. And you know as well as I do that His Majesty has before now intervened on

the side of the family when such questions have been on the tapis, and that no officer of the King's bodyguard may marry without the consent of his sovereign."

This Bertrand knew. That archaic law was one of those petty tyrannies in which the heart of a Bourbon delighted, and was one of the first in connection with his army that Louis XVIII replaced upon the statute book of his reconquered country.

Bertrand tried to argue with old Madame, and sharp words flew between these two, who usually were so entirely at one in their thoughts and their ideals. But he felt that he had been like a drowning man, and the loving, gentle hand that had been held out to him at the hour of his greatest peril had become very dear. Perhaps it would be too much to say that Bertrand loved Nicolette now as passionately as he had loved Rixende in the past, or that the image of one woman had wholly obliterated that of the other: but he was immensely grateful to her, and whenever his memory dwelt on the thought of that sweet, trusting young body clinging to him, of those soft, delicate hands fondling his hair, of that crooning voice murmuring sweet words of love and surrender, he felt a warmth within his heart, a longing for

Nicolette, different, yes! sweeter than anything he had experienced for Rixende.

"When you find yourself face to face with the alternative of giving up your career or that peasant wench, you'll not hesitate, I presume; you, a Comte de Ventadour!"

These were old Madame's parting words, when, wearied with an argument that tended nowhere, Bertrand finally kissed her hand and bade her good night.

"Come, come," she added more gently, "confess that you have been weak and foolish. You loved Rixende de Peyron-Bompar until a week ago. You cannot have fallen out of love and in again in so short a time. Have no fear, my dear Bertrand, an officer in the King's bodyguard, a young man as accomplished as yourself and with a name like yours, has never yet failed to make a brilliant marriage. There are as good fish in the sea as ever come out of it. A little patience, and I'll warrant that within three months you'll be thanking Heaven on your knees that Rixende de Peyron-Bompar was such a fool, for you will be leading to the altar a far richer heiress than she."

But Bertrand now was too tired to say more. He just kissed his grandmother's hand, and

with a sigh and a weary smile, said enigmatically:

“Perhaps!”

Then he went out of the room.

Jaume Deydier met Bertrand de Ventadour on the threshold of the mas.

“Enter, Monsieur le Comte,” he said curtly.

Bertrand followed him into the parlour, and took the chair that Deydier offered him beside the hearth. He inquired anxiously after Nicolette, and the old man told him briefly all that had happened.

“And it were best, Monsieur le Comte,” he concluded abruptly, “if you went back to Paris after this. It is not fair to the child.”

“Not fair to Nicolette!” Bertrand exclaimed. “Then she has told you?”

“Yes, she told me,” he rejoined coldly, “that you and your family have thought of a way of paying your debts.”

An angry flush rose to Bertrand’s forehead. “Monsieur Deydier!” he protested, and jumped to his feet.

“Eh! what?” the father retorted loudly. “What else had you in mind, when, fresh from the smart which one woman dealt you, you sought another whose wealth would satisfy the

creditors who were snapping like dogs at your heels?"

"I swear that this is false! I love Nicolette
——"

"Bah! you loved Rixende a week ago——"

"I love Nicolette," he reiterated firmly, "and she loves me."

"Nicolette is a child who has mistaken pity for love, as many wenches do. You were her friend, her playmate; she saw you floundering in a morass of debt and disgrace, and instinctively she put out her hand to save you. She will get over that love. I'll see to it that she forgets you."

"I don't think you will be able to do that, Monsieur Deydier," Bertrand put in more quietly. "Nicolette is as true as steel."

"Pity you did not find that out sooner, before you ran after that vixen who has thrown you over."

"Better men than I have gone blindly past their happiness. Not many have had the luck to turn back."

"Too late, M. le Comte," Deydier riposted coldly. "I told Nicolette yesterday that never, with my consent, will she be your wife."

"You will kill her, Monsieur Deydier."

"Not I. She is proud and soon she will understand."

"We love one another, Nicolette will understand nothing save that I love her. You may forbid the marriage," Bertrand went on vehemently, "but you cannot forbid Nicolette to love me. We love one another; we'll belong to one another, whatever you may do or say."

"Whatever Madame, your grandmother, may say?" retorted Deydier with a sneer. Then as Bertrand made no reply to that taunt, he added more kindly:

"Come, my dear Bertrand, look on the affair as a man. I have known you ever since you were in your cradle: would I speak to you like this if I had not the happiness of my child to defend?"

Bertrand drew a quick, impatient sigh.

"That is where you are wrong, Monsieur Deydier," he said, "Nicolette's happiness is bound up in me."

"As your mother's was bound up in your father, what?" Deydier retorted hotly. "She too was a loving, trusting girl once: she too was rich; and when her fortune was sunk into the bottomless morass of family debts, your father went out of the world leaving her to starve or not according as her friends were gen-

erous or her creditors rapacious. Look at her now, M. le Comte, and tell me if any father could find it in his heart to see his child go the way of the Comtesse Marcelle?"

"You are hard, Monsieur Deydier."

"You would find me harder still if you brought Nicolette to unhappiness."

"I love her——"

"You never thought of her until your creditors were at your heels and you saw no other way before you to satisfy them, save a rich marriage."

"It is false!"

"False is it?" Deydier riposted roughly, "How else do you hope to satisfy your creditors, M. le Comte de Ventadour? If you married Nicolette without a dowry how would you satisfy them? How would you live? how would you support your wife and your coming family?"

"These may be sordid questions, ugly to face beside the fine sounding assertions and protestations of selfless love. But I am not an aristocrat. I am a peasant and speak as I think. And I ask you this one more question, M. le Comte: in exchange for all the love, the security, the wealth, which a marriage with my daughter would bring you, what have *you* to

offer her? An ancient name? It is tarnished. A château? 'Tis in ruins. Position? 'Tis one of shame. Nay! M. le Comte go and offer these treasures elsewhere. My daughter is too good for you."

"You are both cruel and hard, Monsieur Deydier," Bertrand protested, with a cry of indignation that came straight from the heart. "On my honour the thought of Nicolette's fortune never once entered my mind."

To this Deydier made no reply. A look of determination, stronger even than before, made his face look hard and almost repellent. He pressed his lips tightly together, his eyes narrowed till they appeared like mere slits beneath his bushy brows; he buried his hands in the pockets of his breeches and paced up and down the room, seeming with each step to strengthen his resolve. Then he came to a sudden halt in front of Bertrand, the hardness partly vanished from his face, and he placed a hand, the touch of which was not altogether unkind, on the young man's shoulder.

"Suppose, my dear Bertrand," he said slowly, "suppose I were to take you at your word. On your honour you have assured me that Nicolette's fortune never once entered your head. Very well! Go back now and tell

Madame your grandmother that you love my daughter, that your life's happiness is bound up in hers and hers in yours, but that I am not in a position to give her a dowry. I am reputed rich, but I have no capital to dispose of and I have certain engagements which I must fulfil before I can afford the luxury of paying your debts. I may give Nicolette a few hundred louis a year, pin money, but that is all. One moment, I pray you," Deydier added, seeing that hot words of protest had already risen to Bertrand's lips. "I am not giving you a supposition. I am telling you a fact. If you love Nicolette sufficiently to lead a life of usefulness and simplicity with her, here in her old home, you shall have her. Let old Madame come and ask me for my daughter's hand, on your behalf, you shall have her: but my money, no!"

For a long while after that there was silence between the two men. Jaume Deydier had once more resumed his fateful pacing up and down the room. There was a grim, set smile upon his face, but every time his eyes rested on Bertrand, a sullen fire seemed to blaze within them.

A pall of despair had descended once more on Bertrand, all the darker, all the more suffo-

cating for the brief ray of hope that lightened it yesterday. In his heart, he knew that the old man was right. When he had set out this morning to speak with Deydier, he had done so under the firm belief that Nicolette's fortune expressed in so many words by her father would soon dispel grandmama's objection to her lowly birth. He hoped that he would return from that interview bringing with him such dazzling financial prospects that old Madame herself would urge and approve of the marriage. Like all those who are very young, he was so convinced of the justice and importance of his cause, that it never entered his mind that his advocacy of it would result in failure.

Failure and humiliation!

He, a Comte de Ventadour, had asked for the hand of a peasant wench and it had been refused. Only now did he realise quite how low his family had sunk, that in the eyes of this descendant of lacqueys, his name was worth less than nothing.

Failure, humiliation and sorrow! Sorrow because the briefest searching of his heart had at once revealed the fact that he was *not* prepared to take Nicolette without her fortune, that he was certainly *not* prepared to give up

his career in order to live the life of usefulness at the mas, which Jaume Deydier dangled before him. Oh! he had no illusion on these points. Yesterday when old Madame threatened him with an appeal to the King, there was still the hope that in view of such hopeless financial difficulties as beset him, His Majesty might consent to a *mésalliance* with the wealthy daughter of a worthy manufacturer of Provence. But what Deydier demanded to-day meant that he would have to resign his commission and become an unpaid overseer on a farm, that he would have to renounce his career, his friends, every prospect of ever rising again to the position which his family had once occupied.

Poor little Nicolette! He loved her, yes! but not enough for that. To renounce anything for her sake had not formed a part of his affection. And love without sacrifice—what is it but the pale, sickly ghost of the exacting Master of us all?

Poor little Nicolette! he sighed, and right through the silence of the dull winter's morning there came, faintly echoing, another sigh which was just like a sob.

Both the men swung round simultaneously and gazed upon the doorway. Nicolette stood

there under the lintel. Unable to lie still in bed, while her life's happiness was held in the balance, she had dressed herself and softly crept downstairs.

"Nicolette!" Bertrand exclaimed. And at sight of her all the tenderness of past years, the ideal love of Paul for Virginie surged up in his heart like a great wave of warmth and of pity. "When did you come down?" She came forward into the room, treading softly like a little mouse, her face pale and her lips slightly quivering.

"A moment or two ago," she replied simply.

"Then you heard—" he asked involuntarily.

"I heard," she said slowly. "I heard your silence."

Bertrand raised his two hands and hid his face in them. Never in his life had he felt so ashamed. Deydier went to his daughter's side: he wanted to take her in his arms, to comfort her for this humiliation, which he had been the means of putting upon her, but she turned away from her father and came near to Bertrand. She seized both his wrists with her tiny hands, and dragged them away from his face.

"Look at me, Bertrand," she said gently.

And when his eyes, shamed and passionately imploring met hers, she went on quietly.

"Listen, Bertrand, when yesterday, on our dear island, I confessed to you that I had loved you—all my life—I did it without any thought, any hope that you loved me in return—You could not love me yet—I myself should despise you if you could so easily forget one love for another—but I did it with the firm belief that in time you would learn to love me——"

"Nicolette!" Bertrand cried, and her sweet-sounding name was choked in a sob.

"Listen, my dear," she continued firmly. "Nothing that has passed between my father and you can alter that belief—I love you and I shall love you all my life—I know that it is foolish to suppose that your family would come here and humbly beg me to be your wife—it would also be mad folly to ask you to give up your career in order to bury yourself here out of the world with me. That is not my idea of love: that was not in my thoughts yesterday when I confessed my love to you."

"Nicolette!"

This time it was her father who protested, but she paid no heed to him. She was standing beside Bertrand and she was pleading for her love.

"Nay, father dear," she said resolutely, "you have had your say. Now you must let me have mine. Listen, Tan-tan, what I confessed to you yesterday, that I still confess now. I have loved you always. I love you still. If you will take me now from whatever motive, I am content, for I know that in time you will love me too. Until then I can wait. But if father makes it impossible for you to take me, then we will part, but without bitterness, for I shall understand. And father will understand, too, that without you, I cannot live. I have lain against your breast, my dear, your lips have clung to mine; if they tear me away from you, they will tear my heart out of my body now."

At one time while she spoke her voice had broken, but in the end it was quite steady, only the tears ran steadily down her cheeks. Bertrand looked at her with a sort of hungry longing. He could not speak. Any word would have choked him. What he felt was intense humiliation, and, towards her, worship. When she had finished and still stood there before him, with hands clasped and the great tears rolling down her cheeks, he sank slowly on his knees. He seized both her little hands and

pressed them against his aching forehead, his eyes, his lips: then with a passionate sob that he tried vainly to suppress, he went quickly out of the room.

CHAPTER XIV

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

FOR a few seconds after Bertrand had gone, Nicolette remained standing where she was, quite still, dry-eyed now, and with lips set; she seemed for the moment not to have realised that he was no longer there. Then presently, when his footsteps ceased to resound through the house, when the front door fell to with a bang, and the gate gave a creak as it turned on its hinges, she seemed to return to consciousness, the consciousness of absolute silence. Not a sound now broke the stillness of the house. Jaume Deydier had sunk into a chair and was staring unseeing, into the fire; Margai and the serving wenches were far away in the kitchen. Only the old clock ticked on with dreary monotony, and the flame from the hard olive wood burned with a dull sound like a long-drawn-out sigh.

Then suddenly Nicolette turned and ran towards the door. But her father was too

quick for her: he jumped to his feet and stood between her and the door.

"Where are you going, Nicolette?" he asked.

"What is that to you?" she retorted defiantly.

Just like some dumb animal that has received a death blow Deydier uttered a hoarse cry; he staggered up against the door, and had to cling to it as if he were about to fall. For a second or two he stared at her almost doubting his own sanity. This then was his little Nicolette, the baby girl who had lain in his arms, whose first toddling steps he had guided, for whom he had lain awake o' nights, schemed, worked, lived? The motherless child who had never missed a mother because he had been everything to her, had done twice as much for her as any mother could have done? This, his little Nicolette who stabbed at his heart with that sublime selfishness of love that rides rough-shod over every obstacle, every affection, every duty, and in order to gain its own heaven, hurls every other fond heart into hell?

Deydier was no longer a young man. He had married late in life, and strenuous work had hastened one or two of the unpleasant symptoms of old age. The last two days had

brought with them such a surfeit of emotions, such agonising sensations, that this final sorrow seemed beyond his physical powers of endurance. Clinging to the door, he felt himself turning giddy and faint; once or twice he drew his arm across and across his forehead on which stood beads of cold perspiration. Then a shadow passed before his eyes, the walls of the room appeared to be closing in around him, hemming him in. Everything became dark, black as night; he put out his arms, and the next moment would have measured his length on the floor. It all occurred in less than two seconds. At his first cry all the obstinacy, the defiance in Nicolette's heart, melted in face of her father's grief—her father whom she loved better than anything in the world. When he staggered forward she caught him. She was as strong as a young sapling, and fear and love gave her additional strength. A chair was close by, she was able to drag him into it, to prop him up against the cushions, to fondle him until she saw his dear eyes open, and fasten themselves hungrily upon her. She would then have broken down completely, great sobs were choking her, but she would not cry, not now when he was ill and weak, and it was her privilege to minister to him. She found a

glass and a bottle of old cognac, and made him swallow that.

But when he had drunk the cognac, and had obviously recovered, when he drew her forcibly on his knee crying:

"My little Nicolette, my dear, dear little Nicolette," and pressed her head against his breast, till she could hardly breathe, when she felt hot, heavy tears falling against her forehead, then she could not hold back those sobs any longer, and just lay on his breast, crying, crying, while he soothed her with his big, fond hand, murmuring with infinite tenderness:

"There, there, my little Nicolette! Don't—don't cry—I ought to have told you before. You were a grown girl, and I did not realise it—or I should have told you before——"

"Told me what, father?" she contrived to whisper through her sobs.

"You would have understood," he went on gently. "It was wrong of me to think that you would just obey your old father, without understanding. Love is a giant," he added with a sigh, "he cannot be coerced, I ought to have known."

He paused a moment, and stared out straight before him. Nicolette slid out of his arms on to the floor; her hand was resting on

his knee, and she laid her cheek against it. He drew a deep breath, and then went on:

"Your mother was just like you, my dear, I loved her with as great a love as man ever gave to a woman. But she did not care for me—not then.—Did she ever care, I wonder—God alone knows that."

He sighed again, and Nicolette not daring to speak, feeling that she stood upon the threshold of a secret orchard, that time and death had rendered sacred, waited in silence until he should continue.

"Just like you, my dear," Deydier resumed slowly after awhile, "she had given her heart to one of those Ventadours. Ah! I don't say that he was unworthy. God forbid! Like young Bertrand he was handsome and gallant, full I dare say of enthusiasm and idealism. And she——! Ah, my dear, if you had only known her! She was like a flower! like an exquisite, delicate snowdrop, with hair fairer than yours, and large grey eyes that conquered a man's heart with one look. All the lads of our countryside were in love with her. Margari-dette was her name, but they all called her Ridette; as for me I was already a middle-aged man when that precious bud opened into a perfect blossom. I was rich, and I wor-

shipped her, but I had nothing else to offer. She used to smile when I spoke to her of my love, and softly murmur, sighing: 'Poor Jaume.'

"But somehow I never gave up hope, I felt that love, as strong as mine, must conquer in the end. How this would come about I had not troubled to think, I was not likely to become younger or handsomer as time went on, was I?"

Once more he paused; memories were crowding around him fast. His eyes stared into the smouldering embers of the hearth, seeing visions of past things that had long ceased to be.

"Then one evening, my dear, something was revealed to me. Shall I ever forget that night, soft as a dream, warm as a downy bed; and spring was in the air—spring that sent the blood coursing through one's veins, and beating against one's temples with a delicious sense of longing and of languor. It was Candlemas, and I had been to church at Pertuis where Monseigneur the Bishop of Aix had celebrated Mass. I remember I had walked over with Margai because she had never seen a real bishop celebrating. We had some beautiful tall green candles which I had bought in Marseilles, they were nearly two metres high, and

very thick, and of course these were blessed by Monseigneur. The air was so marvellously still, and we both walked so carefully with our candles, that their lights never went out the whole of the way back from Pertuis. Your grandmother was alive then, and my cousin Violante was staying at the mas with her two children, so when Margai and I arrived home with our beautiful green candles alight, my mother started the round of the house with them, and we all after her, Violante, the children, Margai and the servants, and she marked every door and every window of the mas with a cross, as is traditional in our beautiful country, so as to preserve us all against God's thunder and lightning. And still the candles were burning ; neither the draught nor the rush up and down the stairs had blown out the lights. And they were so tall and thick, that I stuck them up on spikes which I had got ready for the purpose, and they went on burning all through dinner and the whole of the long afternoon. And Margai would have it that candles blessed by a bishop were more potent as harbingers of good fortune than those on which only the hand of a *curé* had lain. So when the sun had gone down, and the air was full of the scent of spring, of young earth, and growing

grass and budding flowers, I took one of the candles and went down into the valley. I wanted to give it to Margaridette so that all the blessings of God of which that burning candle was the symbol, should descend upon her head.

"I went down into the valley, and walked on the shores of the Lèze. The candle burned clear and bright, the flame hardly flickered for the air was so still. Then suddenly I spied, coming towards me, two young forms that seemed as one, so closely did they cling to one another. Young Raymond de Ventadour, it was, and he had his arm around your dear mother's waist, and her pretty head rested against his shoulder. They did not see me, for they were so completely absorbed in one another; and I remained quite still, crouching behind a carob tree, lest I should disturb them in their happiness. But when they had gone by I saw that a breath of wind, or perhaps the lips of an angel, had blown my candle out.

"Well, my dear, after that," Deydier went on in a firmer and more even voice, "I was convinced in my mind that all was well with Margaridette. True, Raymond de Ventadour belonged to an ancient and aristocratic race, but the Revolution was recent then, and we all held

on to those ideals of equality and fraternity for which we had suffered so terribly. Margaridette's father had been a ship-builder in Marseilles; he had retired at the outbreak of the Revolution and bought a house and a little piece of land on the other side of La Bastide. We all looked upon him as something of an "*aristo*," and to me it seemed the most natural thing in the world that the two young people, being in love with one another, should eventually get married, especially as Raymond de Ventadour was a younger son. But though I was a middle-aged man, turned forty then, I had it seems not sufficient experience of life to realise to what depths of infamy man or woman can sink, when their ruling passion is at stake. I had not yet learned to know Madame la Comtesse Margarita de Ventadour, the Italian mother of Bertrand's father, and of young Raymond.

"You know her, my dear, but have you eyes sharp enough to probe the abyss of cruelty that lies in that woman's soul? Her arrogance, her pride of race, her worship of grandeur have made her a fiend—no longer human—just a monster of falsehood and of malice. Well do I remember the day when first the news reached my ears that young M. Raymond was

affianced to Mademoiselle Marcelle de Cercamons. There," he added quickly, and for the first time turning his gaze on the girl kneeling at his feet, "your dear hand is trembling on mine. You have begun to guess something of the awful tragedy which wrecked two young lives at the bidding of that cruel vixen. Yes, that was the news that was all over the villages that summer. M. Raymond was marrying Mademoiselle Marcelle de Cercamons. He was fighting under General Moreau in Germany, but he was coming home early in the autumn to get married. There was no doubt in anyone's mind about it, as the news was originally brought by Pérone, Mme. la Comtesse's own confidential maid. She spoke—to Margai amongst others—about the preparations for the wedding, the beauty of Marcelle de Cercamons, the love M. Raymond had for his beautiful fiancée. The lady was passing rich, and the wedding would take place at her ancestral home in Normandy; all this that spawn of Satan, the woman Pérone, told everyone with a wealth of detail that deceived us all. Then one day she descended like a hideous black crow on Margaridette with a letter purporting to be from M. Raymond, in which he demanded that the poor child should return

him the ring that he had given her in token of his faith. The next day the Comtesse left the château, accompanied by Pérone. She was going to Normandy for the wedding of her son."

"It was all false?" Nicolette murmured under her breath, awed by this tale of a tragedy that she felt was also the story of her destiny.

"All false, my dear," Deydier replied, and the fire of a fierce resentment glowed in his deep-set eyes. "It was M. le Comte de Ventadour, Madame's eldest son, who was marrying Mademoiselle de Cercamons. He, too, was away. He was in Paris, leading the life of dissipation which one has learned to associate with his family. M. Raymond was in Germany fighting under Moreau, and writing letters full of glowing ardour to his beloved. But mark the fulness of that woman's infamy. Before her son left for the war, he had confessed to his mother his love for Margaridette, and the Comtesse, whose cruelty is only equalled by her cunning, appeared to acquiesce in this idyll, nay! to bestow on it her motherly blessing. And do you know why she did that, my dear? So as to gain the two young people's confidence and cause them to send all their letters to one another through her hands. How

should a boy mistrust his own mother? especially after she has blessed him and his love; and Raymond was little more than a boy.

"Madame la Comtesse withheld all his letters from Margaridette, and all Margaridette's letters from him. After awhile, Margaridette thought herself forgotten, and when the news came that her lover had been false to her, and was about to wed another, how could she help but believe it?

"From such depths of falsehood to the mere forging of a letter and a signature asking for the return of the ring, was but a step in this path of iniquity. Poor Margaridette fell into the execrable trap laid for her by those cunning hands, she fell into it like a bird, and in it received her death wound. It was the day of the wedding at Cercamons in Normandy—Pérone, you see, had not spared us a single detail—and I, vaguely agitated, vaguely terrified of something I could not define, could not rest at home. All morning, all afternoon, I tried to kill that agitation by hard work, but the evening came and my very blood was on fire. I felt stifled in the house. My mother, I could see, was anxious about me; her kind eyes fell sadly on me from time to time, while she sat knitting in this very chair by the hearth.

It was late autumn, and the day had been grey and mild, but for some hours past heavy clouds had gathered over Luberon and spread themselves above the valley. Toward eight o'clock the rain came down; soon it turned into a down-pour. The water beat against the shutters, the cypress trees by the gate bowed and sighed under the wind. Presently I noticed that my mother had, as was her wont, fallen asleep over her knitting. I seized the opportunity and stole out of the room, and out of the house. Something seemed to be driving me along, just as it did last night, my dear, when I found that you had gone——”

His rough hand closed on Nicolette's, and he lifted her back upon his knees, and put his arms round her with an almost savage gesture of possession.

“I went down into the valley,” he went on sombrely, “and along the river bank. The rain beat into my face, and all around me the olive and the carob trees were moaning and groaning under the lash of the wind. I had a storm lanthorn with me—for in truth I do believe that God Himself sent me out into the valley that night—and this, I swung before me as I walked through the darkness and the gale. Something drew me on. Something!

“And there, where the mountain stream widens into a shallow pool, and where a great carob tree overshadows the waters, I saw Margaridette crouching beside a boulder, just as I saw you, my little girl, last night. Her hair was wet like yours was, her shawl had slipped from her shoulders and was soaked in the stream; her dear arms were thrown over the wet stone, and her face was buried in her hands. I gathered her up in my arms. I wrapped my coat around her shoulders, and I carried her to the mas, just as I carried you. . . .”

He said no more, and with his arms still held tightly around his child, he once more stared into the fire. And Nicolette lay in his arms, quite still, quite still. Presently he spoke again, but she scarcely heard him now: only a few phrases spoken with more passionate intensity than the rest reached her dulled senses: “She acquiesced—just like a child who was too sick to argue—her father urged it because he thought that Margaridette’s name had been unpleasantly coupled with that of M. Raymond—and then he liked me, and I was rich—and so we were married—and I loved my Margaridette so ardently that in time, I think, she cared for me a little, too—Then you were born, my Nicolette—and she died——”

Nicolette felt as if her very soul were numb within her; her heart felt as if it were dead.

So then this was the end? Oh! she no longer had any illusions, no longer any hope. What could she do in face of THIS? Her father's grief! that awful tragedy which he had recalled had as effectually killed every hope as not even death could have done.

This, then, was the end? Tan-tan would in very truth go out of her life after this. She could never see him again. Never. She could never hope to make him understand how utterly, utterly impossible it would be for her to deal her father another blow. It would be a death blow! And dealt by her? No, it could not, could not be. Vaguely she asked—thinking of Bertrand—what ultimately became of Raymond de Ventadour.

“He came back from the wars,” Deydier explained, “three months after I had laid your mother in her grave. We, in the meanwhile, had heard of the cruel deceit practised upon her by old Madame, we had seen M. le Comte de Ventadour bring home his bride: and it is the fondest tribute that I can offer to my Margari-dette's undying memory, that never once did she make me feel that I had won her through that woman's infamous trick. Raymond de

Ventadour had naturally been led to believe that Margaridette had been false to him: when he came home his first visit was to me. I think he meant to kill me. Never have I seen a man in such a passion of despair. But, standing in the room where she died and where you were born, I told him the whole truth just as I knew it: and I don't know which of us two suffered the most at that hour: he or I."

"And after that?" Nicolette murmured.

"He went away. Some said that he fought in Egypt, and there was killed in action. But no one ever knew: not even his mother. All we did know was that Raymond de Ventadour never came back!"

He never came back!

And Nicolette, lying in her father's arms, took to envying her mother who rested so peacefully in the little churchyard way up at La Bastide. As for her, even her life was not her own. It belonged to this grief-stricken man who held her so closely in his arms that she knew she could never go. It belonged to him, and would have to go on, and on, in dreary, or cheerful monotony, while the snows on Luberon melted year after year, and, year after year, the wild thyme and rosemary came into

bloom, and the flowers on the orange trees blossomed and withered again.

Year after year!

And Bertrand would never come back!

CHAPTER XV

OLD MADAME

WHEN old Madame heard from Bertrand that he had asked Nicolette Deydier to be his wife, and that Jaume had rejected his suit with contempt, she was hotly indignant.

"The insolence of that rabble passes belief!" she said, and refused even to discuss the subject with Bertrand.

"You do not suppose, I imagine," she went on haughtily, "that I should go curtsying to that lout and humbly beg for his wench's hand in marriage for my grandson."

But her pride, though it had received many a blow these last few days, was not altogether laid in the dust. It was not even humbled. To the Comtesse Marcelle she said with the utmost confidence:

"You were always a coward and a fool, my dear: and imbued with the Christian spirit of holding out your left cheek when your right one had been smitten. But you surely know

me well enough to understand that I am not going to do the same in our present difficulty. Fate has dealt us an unpleasant blow, I admit, through the hand of that vixen, my sister Sybille. You notice that I have refrained from having Masses said for the repose of her soul, and if the *bon Dieu* thinks as I do on the subject, Sybille is having a very uncomfortable time in Purgatory just now. Be that as it may, her spirit shall not have the satisfaction of seeing how hard her body could hit, and in a very few days—two weeks at most—you will see how little I have bent to adverse fate, and how quickly I have turned the tide of our misfortune into one of prosperity.”

She would say no more just then, only hinted vaguely at Court influence, which she was neither too old nor too poor to wield. The difficulty was to extract a promise from Bertrand not to do anything rash, until certain letters which she expected from Paris should arrive. Bertrand, indeed, was in such a state of misery that he felt very like a wounded animal that only desires to hide itself away in some hole and corner, there to bleed to death in peace. When Jaume Deydier had delivered his inflexible ultimatum to him, and he had realised that the exquisite Paradise which Nicolette’s

love and self-sacrifice had revealed was indeed closed against him for ever, something in him had seemed to snap: it was his pride, his joy in life, his self-confidence. He had felt so poor, beside her, so poor in spirit, in love, in selflessness, that humiliation had descended on him like a pall, which had in it something of the embrace, the inevitable embrace of death.

He had gone home like a sleepwalker, and had felt like a sleepwalker ever since: neither his sister's sympathy, nor old Madame's taunts and arrogance affected him in the least. The cords of life were so attenuated that he felt they would snap at any moment. This was his only consolation: a broken spirit, which might lead to the breaking of the cords of life. Without Nicolette what was life worth now?

Love had come, but it had come too late. Too late he had come to understand that whilst he gazed, intoxicated and dazzled, upon a showy, artificial flower, an exquisite and fragrant bud had bloomed all the while close to his hand. Like so many young creatures on this earth, he believed that God had especially created him for love and happiness, that the Almighty Hand had for the time being so ordained the world and society that love and happiness would inevitably fall to his lot.

Nevertheless, when those two priceless blessings were actually within his reach, he had thoughtlessly and wantonly turned away from them and rushed after a mirage which had proved as cruel as it was elusive.

And now it was too late!

Like a wanderer on the face of the earth, he would henceforth be for ever seeking that which he had lost.

Only one thing held him now: held him to his home in old Provence, to the old owl's nest and the ruined walls of his ancestral château: that was his mother. The Comtesse Marcelle, broken down in health and spirit, had such a weak hold on life that Bertrand felt that at any rate here was one little thing in the world that he could do to earn a semblance of peace and content for his soul. He could stay beside his mother and comfort her with his presence. He could allay the fears which she had for him and which seemed to drain the very fountain of life in her. So he remained beside her, spending his days beside her couch, reading to her, reassuring her as to his own state of mind. And when he went about the room, or turned toward the door, her anxious eyes would follow his every movement, as if at the back of her mind there was always the awful fear that

the terrible tragedy which had darkened her life once and made of her the heart-broken widow that she was, would be re-enacted again, and she be left in uttermost loneliness and despair.

His mother, of course!

But as for Nicolette, and all that Nicolette stood for now: love, happiness, peace, content, it was too late!

Much, much too late!

He never argued with old Madame about her schemes and plans. He was much too tired to argue, and all his time belonged to his mother. She had so little time of her own left, whilst he had a kind of grotesque consciousness that grandmama would go on and on in this world, planning, scheming, writing letters, and making debts.

Oh! those awful debts! But for them Bertrand would have looked forward with perfect content to following his mother, when she went to her rest.

But there were the debts and the disgrace!

The last of the de Ventadours seeking in death a refuge from shame, and leaving an everlasting blot upon his name! The debts and the disgrace!

He did once try to speak of it to old Madame, but she only laughed.

The debts would be paid—in full—in full! As for the disgrace, how dare Bertrand mention such a word in connection with the de Ventadours. And Bertrand did not dare speak of his father just then. Besides, what had been the use?

The debts and the disgrace; and the shame! That awful day in the magnificent apartment in Paris, when he knelt to Rixende and begged her, begged her not to throw him over! That awful, awful day! And her laugh! It would ring in his ears until the crack of doom. When he told her he could not live without her, she laughed: when he vaguely hinted at a bullet through his head, she had warned him not to make a mess on the carpet. Oh! the shame of that! And old Madame did not seem to understand! The word “disgrace” or “shame” was not to be used in connection with the de Ventadours, and when he, Bertrand, thought of that day in Paris, and of the debts, and—and other things, he ground his teeth, and could have beaten his head against the wall in an agony of shame.

How right Jaume Deydier had been! How right! What was he, Comte de Ventadour,

but a defaulting debtor, a ne'er-do-well, sunk into a quagmire of improbity and beating the air with upstretched hands till they grasped a safety-pole held out to him by the weak, trusting arms of a young girl?

How right Jaume Deydier had been to turn on him and confound him with his final act of cowardice. What had he to offer? Debts, a name disgraced, a heart spurned by another! How right, how right! But, God in heaven, the shame of it!

And grandmama would not understand. Deydier would give his ears, she said, to have a Comte de Ventadour for a son-in-law: he only demurred, made difficulties and demands in order to dictate his own terms with regard to Nicolette's dowry. That was old Madame's explanation of the scene which had well-nigh killed Bertrand with shame. Pretence, she declared, mere pretence on Deydier's part.

"Keep away from the mas, my son," she said coolly to Bertrand one day, "keep away from it for a week, and we'll have Deydier sending his wench to the château on some pretext or another, just to throw her in your way again."

"But, thank God," she added a moment or two later, "that we have not yet sunk so low as to be driven into bestowing the name of Ven-

tadour on a peasant wench for the sake of her money bags."

Not yet sunk so low? Ye gods! Could man sink lower than he, Bertrand, had sunk? Could man feel more shamed than he had done when Nicolette stood beside him and said: "Take me, take all! I'll not even ask for love in return?"

There was no question that the Comtesse Marcelle was sinking. Vitality in her was at its lowest ebb. Bertrand hardly ever left her side. Her only joy appeared to be in his presence, and that of Micheline. When her two children were near her she always seemed to revive a little, and when Bertrand made pathetic efforts to entertain her by telling her tales of gay life in Paris, she even tried to smile.

Old Madame spared her the infliction of her presence. She never entered the sick room; and Pérone only came two or three times a day to do what was necessary for the invalid.

Then one day a mounted courier arrived from Avignon. He brought a letter for old Madame.

It was in the late afternoon. The old owl's nest was wrapped in gloom, for though the Aubussons and the tapestries, the silver and

the spinet had been bought with borrowed money or else on credit, the funds had run low, and candles and oil were very dear.

Marcelle de Ventadour lay on her couch with her children beside her, and only the flickering fire-light to illumine the room. Bertrand for the first time had broached the magic word "America." Many had gone to that far-off land of late, and made fortunes there. Why should not he tempt destiny too? He had sworn to his mother that he would never again think of suicide. The word "America" had made her tremble, but it was not so terrible as death.

And on this dull winter's afternoon, with the fire-light making quaint, fantastic patterns on the whitewashed ceiling, they had for the first time talked seriously of America.

"But promise me, Bertrand," mother had entreated, "that you will not think of it, until I've gone."

And Micheline had said nothing: she had not even wondered what would become of her, when mother had gone and Bertrand sailed for America.

They all heard the noise attendant on the arrival of the courier: the tramping of the horse's hoofs in the court-yard, the rattle of

chains, the banging of doors, and old Madame's voice harsh and excited. Then her quick step along the corridor, the rustle of her gown. Instinctively the three of them drew closer to one another—like trapped animals when the enemy is nigh.

Old Madame came in with arms outstretched, and an open letter in her hand.

"Come to my arms, Bertrand," she said, with a dramatic gesture. "The last of the Ventadours can look every man in the face now."

She was striving to hide her excitement, her obvious relief behind a theatrical and showy attitude. She went up to the little group around the invalid's couch, and stood over them like a masterful, presiding deity. And all the while she flourished the letter which she held.

"A light, Bertrand, for mercy's sake!" she went on impatiently. "Name of a name, all our lives are transformed by this letter! Did I not tell you all along that I would turn the tide of our misfortune into one of prosperity? Well! I've done it. I've done it more completely, more wonderfully than I ever dared to hope! And you all sit here like automatons whilst the entire current of our destiny has been diverted to golden channels!"

She talked rather wildly, somewhat inco-

herently; altogether she appeared different to her usual haughty, unimpassioned self. Bertrand rose obediently and lit the lamp, and placed a chair for old Madame beside the table.

She sat down and without another word to the others, she became absorbed in rereading the letter, the paper made a slight crackling sound while she read, as her hands were trembling a little. The Comtesse Marcelle, silent as usual, kept her eyes fixed on the stately figure of the family autocrat with the pathetic gaze of an unloved dog seeking to propitiate an irascible master. Micheline clung to her mother's hand, silent and subdued by this atmosphere of unreality which grandmama's theatrical gestures and speech had evoked. Bertrand alone appeared disinterested. He stood beside the hearth and stared moodily into the fire as if the whole affair, whatever it was, did not concern him.

Grandmama read the letter through twice from beginning to end. Then she folded it up carefully, laid it on the table, and clasped her hands over it.

"There is no mistake," she said more quietly, "no ambiguity."

She looked at them all as if expecting to be questioned. The news was so wonderful! She

was bubbling over with it, and they sat there like automatons!

"Bertrand," she half implored, half commanded.

"Yes, grandmama," he responded dully.

"You say nothing," she urged with a febrile beating together of her hands, "you ask no questions. And this letter—*mon Dieu*, this letter—it means life to you—to us all!"

"Is it from the King, Madame?" the Comtesse Marcelle asked, still with that look on her face of a poor dog trying to propitiate his master. She was so afraid that grandmama would become angry if Bertrand remained silent—and there were the habits of a life-time—the fear of grandmama if she should become angry.

"The letter is from M. le Marquis de Montaudon," old Madame condescended to explain. "He writes to me in answer to an appeal which I made to him on behalf of Bertrand."

Bertrand tried to rouse himself from his apathy. The habits of a life-time ruled him too—the respect always accorded grandmama when she spoke.

"M. de Montaudon," he said, speaking with an effort, "is treasurer to the King."

"And a valued friend of His Majesty," old

Madame rejoined. "You must have met him in Paris."

"No, never," Bertrand replied. "De Montaudon is a real misanthrope where society is concerned. He leads the life of a hermit wrapped up in bank-notes, so 'tis said, and juggling all day with figures."

"A brilliant man," grandmama assented. "He has saved the financial situation of France and of his King. He is a man who deals in millions, and thinks in millions as others do in dozens. He and I were great friends once," she went on with a quick, impatient sigh, "many, many years ago—in the happy days before the Revolution—my husband took me up to Paris one year when I was sick with nostalgia and ennui, and he feared that I would die of both complaints in this old owl's nest. Then it was that I met de Montaudon—le beau Montaudon as he was called—and he fell in love with me. He had the blood of the South in his veins, for his mother was a Sicilian, and he loved me as only children of the South can love—ardently, immutably.

"My husband's jealousy, then the turmoil of the Revolution, and finally Montaudon's emigration to England, whence he only returned six years ago, kept us apart all this

while. A whole life-time lies between the miseries of to-day and those happy, golden days in Paris. Since then my life has been one ceaseless, tireless struggle to rebuild the fortunes of this family to which I had been fool enough to link my destiny. Forty years I have worked and toiled and fought—beaten again and again—struck down by Fate and the cowardice of those who should have been my fellow-workers and my support—but vanquished never—I have fought and struggled—and had I died during the struggle I should have died fighting and unconquered. Forty years!” she went on with ever-growing excitement, whilst with a characteristic gesture of determination and energy she beat upon the letter before her with her fists, “but I have won at last! Montaudon has not forgotten. His letter here is in answer to mine. I asked him for the sake of old times to extend his patronage to my grandson, to befriend him, to help him in his career! And see his reply!”

She took up the letter once more, unfolded it, smoothed it out with loving, quivering hands. She put up her lorgnette to read: obviously her eyes were dim, filled with tears of excitement and of joy.

"This is how he begins," she began slowly, striving in vain to steady her voice.

BEAUTIFUL AND UNFORGETTABLE FRIEND,

Send your grandson to me! I will provide for him, because he belongs to you, and because in his eyes I shall mayhap find a look which will help me to recapture a memory or so out of the past. Send the boy without delay. I really need a help in my work, and there is a young and beautiful lady who is very dear to me; for whom I would gladly find a well-born and handsome husband. Your grandson appears to be the very man for that attractive office: thus he will have a brilliant career before him as my protégé and an exquisitely sentimental one as the husband of one of the loveliest women in this city where beautiful women abound. See! how right you were to make appeal to my memory. I never forget. . . ."

This was no more than one half of the letter, but old Madame read no more. She glanced round in triumph on the three faces that were turned so eagerly towards her. But nobody spoke. Marcelle was silent, but her eyes were glowing as if new life had been infused into

her blood. Micheline was silent because, young as she was, she had had in life such vast experience of golden schemes that had always gone agley! and Bertrand was silent because his very soul was in travail with hope and fear, with anxiety and a wild, mad, bewildering excitement which almost choked him.

Grandmama talked on for awhile: she planned and she arranged and gazed into a future so golden that she and Marcelle and Micheline were dazzled by it all. Bertrand alone remained obstinately silent: neither old Madame's impatience, nor his mother's joy dragged him out of his moodiness. In vain did grandmama expatiate on M. de Montaudon's wealth and influence, or on the array of beautiful and rich heiresses whose amorous advances to Bertrand would make the faithless Rixende green with envy, in vain did his mother murmur with pathetic entreaty:

"Are you not happy, Bertrand?"

He remained absorbed, buried in thoughts, thoughts that he was for the moment wholly incapable of co-ordinating. It seemed to him as if hundreds of thousands of voices were shrieking in his ear: hundreds of thousands that were high-pitched and harsh like the voice of old Madame; they shrieked and they

screamed, and they roared, and the words that they uttered all came in a jumble, incoherent and deafening: a medley of words through which he only distinguished a few from time to time:

“Treasurer to the King!” some of the voices shrieked.

“All debts paid in full—in full!” others screamed.

“Wealth—an heiress—a brilliant marriage—Rixende—envy—hatred—chance—career—money—money—money—wealth—a rich heiress—money—money—no debts——”

They shrieked and they shrieked, and he could no longer hear grandmama’s arguments, nor his mother’s gentle appeal. They shrieked so loudly that his head buzzed and his temples throbbed: because all the while he was straining every nerve to listen to something which was inaudible, which was drowned in that awful uproar.

After awhile the noise was stilled. Old Madame ceased to speak. The Comtesse Marcelle, wearied out by so much excitement, lay back with eyes closed against the pillows. Micheline was bathing her forehead with vinegar. Bertrand woke as from a dream. He

gazed about him like a sleepwalker brought back to consciousness, and found old Madame's slightly mocking gaze fixed upon him. She shrugged her shoulders.

"You are bewildered, my dear," she said not unkindly. "I am not surprised. It will take you some time to realise the extent of your good fortune."

She carefully folded the letter up again, and patted it with both her hands like a precious, precious treasure.

"What a future, Bertrand," she exclaimed suddenly. "What a future! In my wildest dreams I had never hoped for this!"

She looked at him quizzically, then smiled again.

"Were I in your shoes, my dear, I should be equally bewildered. Take my advice and go quietly to your room and think it all over. To-morrow we will plan the immediate future. Eh?"

"Yes, to-morrow!" Bertrand assented mechanically.

"You will have to start for Paris very soon," she went on earnestly.

"Very soon," Bertrand assented again.

"Well! think over it, my dear," old Madame concluded; she rose and made for the door;

"I'll say good night now, Marcelle," she said coolly. "I am tired too, and will sup in my room, then go early to bed. Come and kiss me, Micheline!" she added.

The girl obeyed; old Madame's hand was now on the handle of the door.

"Are you too dazed," she said with a not unkind touch of irony and turning to Bertrand, "to bid me good night, my dear?"

He came across to her, took her hand and kissed it.

"Good night, grandmama," he murmured.

Smiling she held up the letter.

"The casket," she said, "that holds the golden treasure."

He put out his hand for it.

"May I have it?"

For a moment she seemed to hesitate, then shrugged her shoulders:

"Why not?" she said, and placed the letter in his hand: but before her hold on it relaxed, she added seriously: "You will be discreet, Bertrand?"

"Of course," he replied.

"I mean you will not read more than the first page and a half, up to the words: 'I never forget——' "

"Up to the words 'I never forget'," Bertrand assented. "I promise."

He took the letter and thrust it into the pocket of his coat. Old Madame with a final nod to him and the others sailed out of the room.

"Mother is tired," Micheline said, as soon as grandmama had gone, "let us leave the talking until to-morrow; shall we?"

Bertrand agreed. He appeared much relieved at the suggestion, kissed his mother and sister and finally went away.

CHAPTER XVI

VOICES

THE shrieking voices were all stilled, but there were murmurings and whisperings in Bertrand's ears all the while that he made his way down into the valley. He had no definite purpose in his mind, only just wandered down the mountain side, in and out of the groves of olive trees and mimosa, past the carob tree beside which when a boy he was wont to tilt at dragons, whilst wee, podgy Nicolette would wait patiently, stiff and sore and uncomplaining, until he was ready to release her. The whole drama of his life seemed to be set on this mountain side beside the carob tree: his hot-headedness, his selfishness, his impulsive striving after impossible ideals, beside Nicolette's gentle abnegation and her sublime surrender.

After the cold of the early days of the year, the air had become sweet and balmy: already there was a feeling of spring in the warm, gentle breeze that came wafted from the south

and softly stirred the delicate tendrils of grevillea and mimosa. In the branches of carob and olive the new sap was slowly rising, whilst the mossy carpet beneath the wanderer's feet was full of young life and baby shoots that exhaled a perfume of vitality and of young, eager growth. From the valley below there rose a pungent scent of wild thyme and basilisk, and from afar there came wafted on the gently stirring wings of night the fragrance of early citron-blossom. Overhead the canopy of the sky was of an intense, deep indigo: on it the multitude of tiny stars appeared completely detached, like millions of infinitesimal balls, never still . . . winking, blinking, alive—a thousand hued and infinitely radiant. When Bertrand emerged into the open, the crescent moon, mysterious and pale, was slowly rising above the ruined battlements of the old château. A moment later and the whole landscape gleamed as if tinged with silver. A living, immense radiance shimmering like an endless sheet of myriads upon myriads of paillettes, against which trenchant and detached, as if thrown upon that glowing background, by the vigorous brush of a master craftsman, rose the multi-coloured tiled roofs of the mas, the sombre splashes of slender cypress trees, or the

bright golden balls of oranges nestling in the dark, shiny foliage.

And the wanderer stood and gazed upon this perfect picture which was his home: old Provence the land of his ancestors, of the troubadours, of the courts of love, of romance and poesy: the fragrant, exquisite, warm land of the south; and out of all this beauty, this radiance, this life, there rose in his heart a wild, mad longing that seemed almost to deprive him of his senses. Voices rose out of the valley, came down from the mountain side, voices gentle and sweet were all around him, and the words that they murmured and whispered all became merged into one—just one magic word, a name that was the very essence, the inbeing of his longing.

“Nicolette!”

He arrived at the mas, just after they had finished supper. Jaume Deydier was sitting silent and moody, as he always was now, beside the fire. Nicolette was helping Margai to put the house in order for the night. The front door was still on the latch and Bertrand walked straight into the living-room. At sight of him Deydier rose frowning.

“M. le Comte,” he began.

But Bertrand went boldly up to him. He placed one hand on the old man's shoulder, and with the other drew the letter out of his pocket—the letter which had been written by M. de Montaudon who was Treasurer to the King.

“Monsieur Deydier,” he said simply, “a fortnight ago, when I had the presumption to suppose that you would consent to my marriage with your daughter, you very justly taunted me in that I had nothing whatever to offer her save a tarnished name and a multiplicity of debts. You spoke harshly that day, Monsieur Deydier——”

“My dear Bertrand,” the old man put in kindly.

“Let me have my say, Monsieur Deydier,” Bertrand went on speaking very rapidly, “for in truth the words are choking me. No doubt you think me an impudent puppy for daring to come to you again. But circumstances are different now—very, very different. I no longer come before you empty-handed, I come to you to-day holding here, in my hand, a brilliant career, a dazzling future. Those two things are mine—a free gift to me from one who believes in me, who means me well. They are mine, Monsieur Deydier,” and Bertrand's

voice broke on a note of pathetic entreaty, "and I have come to you to-night just to lay them without the slightest compunction or regret at the feet of Nicolette. Let her come to me," he entreated. "I want neither money, nor luxury, nor rank. I only want her and her love. My career, my future prospects I just offer her in exchange for the right to live here with you at the mas, to be your son, your servant, your devoted worker, to do with and order about just as you please! Read this letter, Monsieur Deydier, you will see that I am not lying—— Everything I have—everything I hope for—family—friends—I want nothing—if only you will give me Nicolette."

Now his voice broke completely. He sank into a chair and hid his face in his hand, for his eyes were filled with tears.

Silently Jaume took the letter from him, and silently he read it. When he had finished reading, he gave the letter back to Bertrand.

"You have your mother to consider, M. le Comte," was the first thing he said.

"My mother's hold on life is so slender, Monsieur Deydier," Bertrand replied. "When she is gone nothing will hold me to the château, for Micheline loves me and would be happy if she were anywhere with me."

"And do you really mean all that you said just now?" the old man rejoined earnestly.

"Ask yourself, Monsieur Deydier," Bertrand replied simply. "Do you think that I was lying?"

"No!" Deydier said firmly, and placed an affectionate hand on the other's shoulder. "But there is old Madame——"

"For the sake of a past sin," Bertrand retorted, "or a time-worn revenge, would you wreck Nicolette's happiness? She loves me. She will never be happy without me. Old Madame shall never come between us. She will remain at the château, or go as she pleases, but she shall never cross my life's path again. 'Tis with me now, and with me alone that you need deal, Monsieur Deydier. By giving up all that M. de Montaudon has offered me, I break definitely with the past, and 'tis to Nicolette that I look for the future, to Nicolette and this old place which I love: and if you no longer think me mean and unworthy . . ."

The words died upon his lips. He had spoken dully, quietly, with intent gaze fixed upon the flickering fire. But now, suddenly two warm, clinging arms were around his neck,

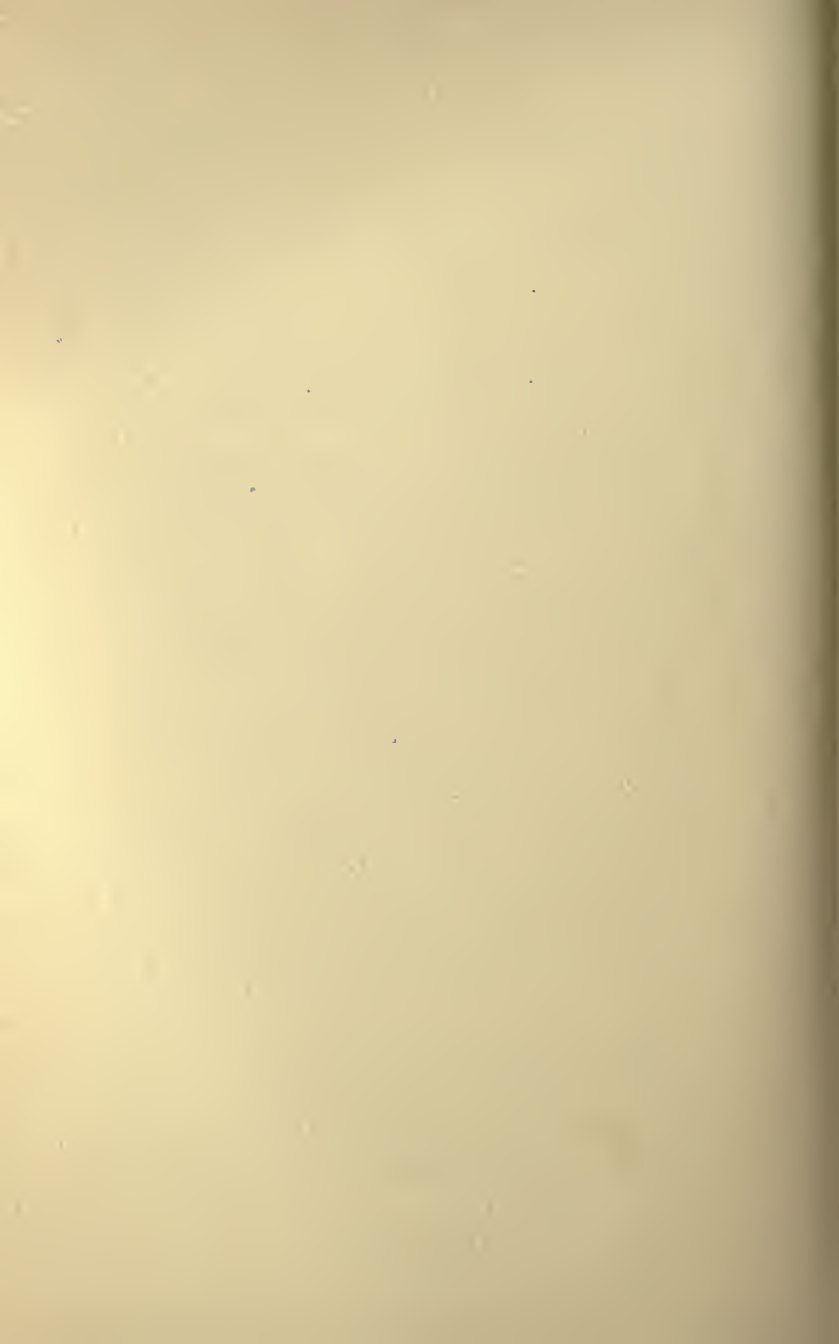
a soft, silky mass of brown curls was against his cheek.

"You are right, Tan-tan," a fairy voice murmured in his ear, "I will never be happy without you."

The next moment he was down on his knees, pressing his face against two sweet-smelling palms, that were soft and fragrant like a mass of orange-blossom.

And Jaume Deydier tiptoed silently out of the room.

THE END

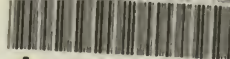


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